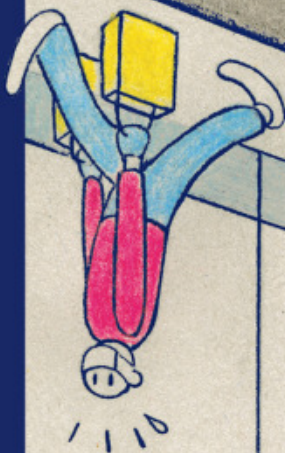


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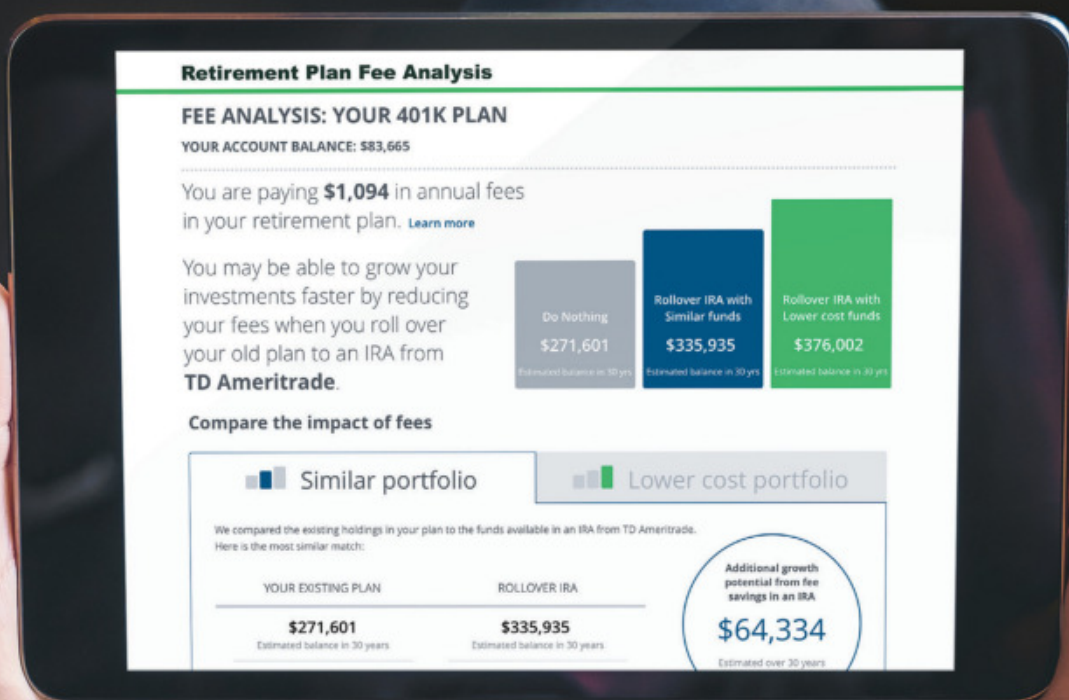


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THE NEW YORKER THE FICTION ISSUE

JUNE 8 & 15, 2020

5 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

13 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Jelani Cobb on the protests in Minneapolis; a nuclear-age time capsule; playing Staten Island; when Zoom seems passé; not invited to the party.

LETTER FROM REYKJAVÍK

Elizabeth Kolbert 25 Independent People
Why has Iceland's coronavirus plan been so successful?

PROFILES

Hua Hsu 32 The Making of Americans
How Maxine Hong Kingston reshaped literature.

FICTION

Ernest Hemingway 18 "Pursuit as Happiness"
Haruki Murakami 40 "Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey"
Emma Cline 48 "White Noise"

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Miranda July 21 Praying
Matthew Klam 29 Breaking Stride
Bryan Washington 45 You Miss It When It's Gone
Ottessa Moshfegh 57 Brooklyn

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Joan Acocella 62 *A new biography of Andy Warhol.*
James Wood 69 *Megha Majumdar's "A Burning."*
71 Briefly Noted
James Marcus 72 *The disappearing fame of Longfellow.*

THE ART WORLD

Peter Schjeldahl 76 *Edward Hopper's clarity of vision.*

ON TELEVISION

Doreen St. Félix 78 *HBO expands its streaming services.*

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Anthony Lane 80 "Shirley," "The Vast of Night."

POEMS

Melissa Ginsburg 36 "Pastoral"
Alex Dimitrov 53 "More"

COVER

Richard McGuire "This Side Up"

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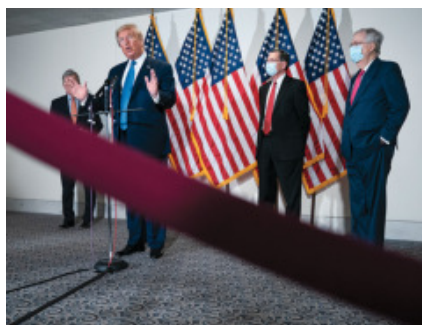
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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

Susan B. Glasser on why Donald Trump is the most mendacious President in U.S. history.



POSTSCRIPT

Masha Gessen, Michael Specter, and Calvin Trillin remember the AIDS activist Larry Kramer.

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THE WALLS OF ROUND HILL

Evan Osnos's survey of how country-club Republicans have embraced Trumpism was brilliantly done ("The Greenwich Rebellion," May 11th). Osnos makes their conversion to winner-take-all libertarianism seem so natural that one wonders whether the super-rich ever felt the need for, as John Kenneth Galbraith termed it, "a truly superior moral justification for selfishness." Members of the older generation in Greenwich, Connecticut, who called the prominent resident Prescott Bush a "Ten Commandments man," must have admired both his sense of decorum and his moral stature. In this vivid chronicle, the absence of religious congregations prompts one to wonder whether a turn away from faith has led members of the one per cent to usher in what Osnos calls "a vision of politics that forgives cruelty as the price of profit." A decline in the importance of religious services—as a moral and reputational obligation among peers—has perhaps hastened wealthy Republicans' embrace of cruelty toward the vulnerable as the price of profit for themselves.

*Claudia Koonz
Chapel Hill, N.C.*

I was saddened, but not surprised, to read Osnos's account of the ubiquitous high stone walls erected by wealthy property owners in Greenwich, where I grew up. My brother and I, as children in the Round Hill Road area, once surreptitiously stocked our coaster wagon with canned goods from our mother's pantry and sold them to neighbors—ostensibly to raise money for cancer research, but actually to buy candy at the Round Hill Store. When our mother discovered the ruse, we were punished and made to send the money to the American Cancer Society. It was a life lesson about questionable entrepreneurship—one commonly taught in that once inviting countryside environment. Ten years ago, at age seventy, I

took my wife back to Round Hill Road, to see the grounds of Seabury House, the former conference center of the Episcopal Church, where my siblings and I spent hours playing. But there was no way to get near the estate. All access was blocked off by high walls.

*William Heuss
South Yarmouth, Mass.*

FUNGI: THE FINAL FRONTIER

I enjoyed Hua Hsu's piece on mycophiles—in particular, his discussion of the mycologist and mushroom evangelist Paul Stamets (Books, May 18th). I must admit that I was hoping for a mention of Stamets's twenty-third-century sci-fi namesake, Lieutenant Commander Paul Stamets, a character on the show "Star Trek: Discovery." In the series, Stamets, played by Anthony Rapp, is a so-called astromycologist who serves as the ship's "spore-drive specialist." His responsibilities include using spores from a particular species of fungus to move the ship instantaneously to any point in the universe, travelling along a subspace "mycelial plane." Real-world scientists have deemed this propulsion system nonviable, but the spirit of the concept—in a show whose purpose, as Manu Saadia wrote in this magazine, in 2016, was "to imagine foreign, even utopian futures"—is in keeping with the real Stamets's advocacy for the use of fungi to improve our world. Stamets and other mycophiles seem to intuit that the ability to create such utopias might involve, as Hsu puts it, "giving oneself up to the weft of a connected world, and making peace with one's smallness."

*Tracy L. Bealer
New York City*

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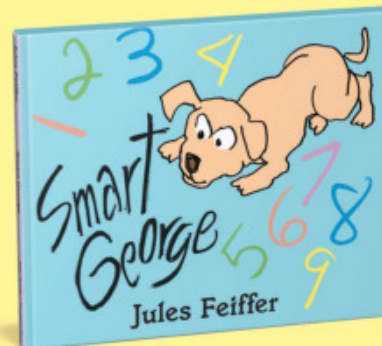


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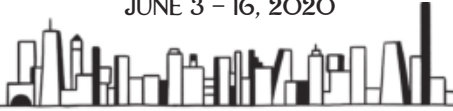
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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

JUNE 3 – 16, 2020



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The theatre initiative the **Homebound Project** has been live-streaming batches of original short plays, written and shot in isolation, to benefit food-deprived children during the pandemic. The next edition, available June 3-7, includes the actors Diane Lane, Blair Underwood, and Ashley Park and the playwrights Bess Wohl, John Guare, and Michael R. Jackson, the winner of this year's Pulitzer Prize for drama. The "Hamilton" star Phillipa Soo, above, will appear in a work by Clare Barron. Watch at homeboundtheater.org.

PHOTOGRAPH BY REBECCA REEVE

MUSIC

Essentially Ellington Festival

JAZZ For twenty-five years now, Jazz at Lincoln Center has been throwing teen-agers into the lions' den with the Essentially Ellington Festival competition, which asks high-school students to take on the challenging and elegant music of the Duke Ellington Orchestra and other classic big bands. This year, J.A.L.C. offers free virtual events—streaming on Zoom, jazz.org, and the organization's social-media pages—that include a live Q. & A. with Wynton Marsalis, a master class with the saxophonist Ted Nash, jam sessions that blend self-isolating students with J.A.L.C. band members, and a climactic all-day listening session featuring eighteen American and five international ensembles.—*Steve Futterman (June 8-12.)*

Gunna: "Wunna"

HIP-HOP The Atlanta rapper Gunna recently evoked his zodiac sign—he's a Gemini—to explain why he titled his new album "Wunna." The name, he says, refers to an alter ego who inspires spontaneity in his music. Though he sometimes speeds up his flow over skittering

beats in songs such as "Skybox," most of the project stays tethered to the rapper's signature languid delivery, inspired by his mentor Young Thug, who appears twice on the record. What doesn't come through is a new dimension of the artist; if anything, Gunna leans deeper into the subdued flexes and laid-back verses for which he's already known. Fans never meet the impulsive second self he's promised, though that likely won't matter to those looking for an extension of his woozy catalogue.—*Julyssa Lopez*

John Lee Hooker: "The Sensation Recordings"

BLUES Of all the canonical postwar bluesmen, John Lee Hooker was the most deliberately primitive: with only a guitar and one stomping foot, he was as forcefully rhythmic as any band, blues or otherwise. "Documenting the Sensation Recordings 1948-52," a fascinating (if sometimes dull) three-disk set of his early work, demonstrates that Hooker's roughness was intentional—the numerous alternate takes of a handful of songs are all at least a little different, many markedly so. Those variations take hold because the songs themselves—"Boogie Chillen," "Grinder Man," and "House Rent Boogie" among them—retain their hypnotic allure.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Aleksandra Kurzak: "Desire"

OPERA Singers typically issue a calling-card album of famous arias at the start of their recording career, to show companies and audiences what they can do with some of the most beloved solos in opera. Aleksandra Kurzak, having released such a disk of coloratura showpieces a decade ago, uses the format again on "Desire," staking her claim as a lyric soprano who can handle more than vocal decoration. She doesn't wholly make her case in the album's heavier repertoire—"Madama Butterfly," "Il Trovatore," "Tosca"—but her singing is rarely less than lovely, with an enviably fluid legato. Still, it's the acrobatic *staccati*, tight trills, and efficient runs that prove she has the vocal finish of a prima donna.—*Oussama Zahr*

Muzz: "Muzz"

ROCK The chic new trio Muzz unites the Interpol singer Paul Banks with the producer and multi-instrumentalist Josh Kaufman and the drummer Matt Barrick, who played in the fondly remembered bands Jonathan Fire*Eater and the Walkmen. Listeners should head elsewhere for a full spectrum of human sentiment: on Muzz's self-titled debut album, the trio rides one prevailing vibe with a relentlessness to rival Weird Al Yankovic's. But, where Yankovic knows no pain, Muzz seems immune to joy. Banks, never the perkier vocalist, might be auditioning to read a Camus audiobook. Songs build around him with muted opulence; frequently deployed horns and organs color the margins without overwhelming the music's essential fragility. The album's secret weapon may prove to be Barrick's drumming: busy but unflashy, his beats conjure their own kind of elegance and gloom.—*Jay Rutenberg*

Philip Glass Ensemble: "Music in Eight Parts"

CLASSICAL Despite its modest twenty-two-minute length, the newest recording by the Philip Glass Ensemble—its first without Glass among the players—is a historic event. "Music in Eight Parts" documents a transitional work from 1970, when the composer's language was at its most rigorous and austere. The score, likely sold by Glass to cover debts incurred from producing his opera "Einstein on the Beach" at the Met, was rediscovered in 2017, at Christie's auction house, and arranged by the composer Alex Gray to suit the present ensemble's instrumentation. After this year's live performances were scuttled by COVID-19, the players recorded their parts in isolation, for subsequent assembly—a process that served to heighten the music's intrinsic clockwork elegance.—*Steve Smith*

Sweet Spirit: "Trinidad"

ROCK On Sweet Spirit's 2017 record, "St. Mojo," its lead singer, Sabrina Ellis, self-identified as someone who "laughed at teacher, partied under the bleacher, and drank" to the sound of cocky glam guitars. On the sextet's third LP, "Trinidad," Ellis remains that storied American rock creature, a proud outsider forever teetering between sass and vulnerability, but the musical ground has shifted, with the Austin group increasingly embracing the gleaming textures and body-moving agenda of pop. Rock bands that flirt with such sounds—the shiny world above the bleachers—tend to appear naïve or even mercenary. Yet Sweet Spirit grasps the right

HIP-HOP



The opening seconds of **Run the Jewels'** new album, "RTJ4," are as explosive as a crack of lightning: Killer Mike and El-P unleash a torrent of adrenaline on "Yankee and the Brave," a track that introduces the loose concept of an absurdist TV show about two hustlers on the run after being framed by cops. The story line captures the mutinous spirit of these real-life rap insurgents, known for their relentless rebukes of injustice, oppression, and capitalism. But here they've evolved from blunt radicals into clear-eyed prophesiers who take no joy in how well placed their fury has been. Their delivery becomes almost sermonlike on "Pulling the Pin," which features Mavis Staples lamenting, "At worst, I've been right from the start." Still, their defiance never wavers; Killer Mike closes the record by referencing the brutality that black bodies have endured, declaring, "Last words for the firing squad was 'Fuck you, too.'"—*Julyssa Lopez*

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What does patience mean in a pandemic? **Ryan McNamara** offers one answer with “Fleshcore” (above), a three-minute video whose percussive audio remixes the hold music that callers endure when trying to file unemployment claims with the New York State Department of Labor. McNamara doesn’t appear in his new piece, but he is a magnetic performer in his own right—a dancer with no formal training who is at his most inventive when he’s thinking about bodies as bridges between physical and virtual worlds. (His 2013 tour de force “MEEM: A Story Ballet About the Internet” won Performa’s Malcolm McLaren Award.) In the slight but touching “Fleshcore,” an online commission for the Guggenheim’s “Works & Process” series (premiering on June 13, at guggenheim.org), McNamara unites nine of his longtime collaborators—Kim Brandt, Burr Johnson, Kyli Kleven, Mickey Mahar, Jen Rosenblit, Quenton Stuckey, Brandon Washington, Josh Weidenmiller, and Emily Wexler—by layering choreographed movements that each dancer performed for the camera in isolation. As all the faces, fingers, torsos, and feet merge, trancelike, into one exquisite corps de ballet, the solitary confinement of quarantine gives way to the tenderness of human contact. —*Andrea K. Scott*

tone, projecting sophistication without aspiring to monetary glitz. Like many pop records, “Trinidad” ultimately lives and dies on the charisma of its front person. Regardless of any real-life profile, Ellis looms like a star within the singer’s own mind—which, as any rocker knows, is the only place that matters. —*J.R.*

ART

“Bedtime Stories”

The Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan is well known for his sarcasm (you’ve probably heard about the banana he duct-taped to an art-fair wall); in this project, which he dreamed up for the New Museum, he shows his sweet side. Every day through the month of June, a different artist shares a bedtime story (very loosely defined) on the museum’s Web site. The first broadcast strikes a warm, wistful note: Iggy Pop reads a love letter to his late dog, which he first spotted from across a highway in Mexico. Others take more aloof, philosophical, or cryptic approaches. Tacita Dean reads most of Thomas Hardy’s

1899 poem “An August Midnight,” stopping at a lovely moment when various insects meet the writer “At this point in time, at this point in space.” Laure Prouvost whispers a text she wrote, introducing it with a glossary of elegantly bizarre word substitutions (“Remember, when I say ‘cigarette,’ it means ‘left’”). Rashid Johnson recites a nighttime poem by Amiri Baraka, written in 1957 but eerily suited to the present moment. Marilyn Minter’s anti-Trump limerick is hardly a lullaby—but it might pair well with a nightcap. —*Johanna Fateman* (newmuseum.org)

“Neri Oxman: Material Ecology”

This Israeli-American artist—who is also an architect, a designer, and a professor at M.I.T.—works “between the grown and the made,” as she explains in a short video accompanying the online iteration of her currently closed MOMA show, now part of the museum’s “Virtual Views” series. Oxman and her collaborators in M.I.T.’s Media Lab use natural processes and substances to produce stunning objects that convey a captivating organic-futurist vision. The main attraction at MOMA is “Silk Pavilion II,” a monumental, gracefully torqued tentlike structure,

made by some seventeen thousand silkworms that Oxman placed on a rotating mesh base to encourage the insects to spin fibre sheets rather than cocoons. The show’s art works double as prototypes: a wall of what look like amber strips of molted reptile skin are samples of 3-D-printed polymers, biodegradable alternatives to plastic. A number of sculptures use mushroom-based melanin, suggesting transformative uses for the material, including as energy-harvesting components for building façades. Despite the emphatically physical nature of these fantastic experiments, the show translates well online thanks to installation images, audio commentary, and a Q. & A. with Oxman and the curator Paula Antonelli—a digital index of innovations that are at once otherworldly and earthy. —*J.F.* (moma.org)

“Vida Americana”

This thumpingly great show at the Whitney, subtitled “Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1924-1945,” picks an overdue art-historical fight. The usual story revolves around young, often immigrant aesthetes striving to absorb European modernism. A triumphalist tale composed backward from its climax—the postwar success of Abstract Expressionism—it brushes aside the prevalence, in the thirties, of politically themed figurative art: social realism, more or less, which became ideologically toxic with the onset of the Cold War. What to do with the mighty legacy of the era’s big three Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros? As little as possible has seemed the rule, despite the seminal influence of Orozco and Siqueiros on the young Jackson Pollock. But, with some two hundred works by sixty artists and abundant documentary material, the curator Barbara Haskell reweaves the sense and sensations of the time to bring it alive. Without the Mexican precedents of amplified scale and passionate vigor, the development of Abstract Expressionism lacks crucial sense. As for the politics, consider the persistently leftward tilt of American art culture ever since—a residual hankering, however sotto voce, to change the world. (The Whitney is temporarily closed, but a selection of the show’s works and related videos are available online.) —*Peter Schjeldahl* (whitney.org)

Guo Fengyi

This Chinese artist didn’t begin making her astonishing scrolls until 1989, when she was in her late forties. That was the year of the Tiananmen massacre, but Guo wasn’t responding to world events—the mythic beings she brought to electrifying life (from the Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara to Santa Claus) came to her in visions. A few years earlier, severe arthritis had forced the artist to quit her job as a chemical analyst in Xi’an, where she lived until her death, in 2010, at the age of sixty-eight. She took up Qigong to alleviate pain; soon she was transcribing revelations. She believed that her scrolls, most of which are twelve to thirty feet high, had the power to heal. You might think of them as monuments to uncertainty—“I draw because I do not know,” Guo once said—making her chimeric figures ideal viewing right now. Two concurrent exhibitions of her work were closed by the pandemic, in March, but you can read the Drawing Center’s richly illustrated publication “Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance” online and take a video tour of the artist’s work on the Gladstone gallery’s Web site. —*Andrea K. Scott* (drawingcenter.org and gladstonegallery.com)

DANCE

Alvin Ailey

During what would have been its late-spring run at Lincoln Center, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre is keeping up a strong virtual presence with Ailey All Access. On June 4, in conjunction with Lincoln Center at Home, the company streams an excellent program from 2015, with Ronald K. Brown's uplifting "Grace," the outside-the-comfort-zone challenge of Wayne McGregor's futuristic "Chroma," and, naturally, Ailey's "Revelations." Excerpts of "Revelations," performed by the troupe's scattered dancers, also serve as the finale for the first-ever online Ailey Spirit Gala, on June 11. For the occasion, Troy Powell, the artistic director of Ailey II, is choreographing a piece that somehow features a cast of forty-five company members, alumni, and students.—*Brian Seibert (alvinaiiley.org)*

Camille A. Brown & Dancers

Brown's "ink," from 2017, is her best yet. The conclusion of a trilogy investigating African-American identity, it's a distillation of her gestural language, drawing, in a more abstract form, on the storytelling skills she's developed as an in-demand choreographer for theatre. A powerful solo for Brown leads into duets of love and male bonding, moments of connection that build to a communal explosion. On June 3, you can watch the piece for free on the Facebook page for the Arts Center at New York University's Abu Dhabi campus, where her company performed it last year.—*B.S.*

Dance Theatre of Harlem

With the final performances of its fiftieth-anniversary season cancelled, this much cherished troupe now throws its hat in the ring of the moment by presenting samples of its archive online for free. For its first offering, available on YouTube and Facebook June 6-7, the company fittingly turns to its first production of a full-length classic, "Creole Giselle," from 1984, which sets the nineteenth-century French ballet amid the plantations, bayous, and caste system of Louisiana. It's a slice of dance history well worth revisiting. In the days running up to the screening, online conversations and interviews with cast members provide context while building suspense.—*B.S. (dancetheatreofharlem.org)*

Martha Graham Dance Company

The "Martha Matinee" for June 3-6 is devoted to the early, starkly pure piece "Primitive Mysteries." A phalanx advances, forming lines, wedges, and circles, within which circulates a figure in white; Graham's inspirations included depictions of the young Virgin in Catholic ritual and Native American religious practices. The screening includes archival footage, from 1964, featuring Yuriko, a leading Graham dancer from the forties on, as well as film of Graham and her company in "Heretic," from 1929. The following week, the company screens Graham's 1958 Greek drama, "Clytemnestra," and rare rehearsal footage of Graham.—*Marina Harss (marthagraham.org)*

Royal Danish Ballet

"Romeo and Juliet" has been a staple of ballet stages since Sergei Prokofiev's heart-catch-

ingly cinematic score was used in the ballet's premiere, in 1938. The Royal Danish Ballet's version, from 1971, is by the American-born, Hamburg-based John Neumeier. In a 2016 performance, now being screened by the company on its Web site, Ida Praetorius and Andreas Kaas, as the young lovers, exhibit the Danes' particular skill at inhabiting characters with the naturalness of theatre actors, as well as the freshness of the Danish dancing style. The company is also screening a full version of the late Petipa ballet "Raymonda," short on plot but long on Hungarian-flavored dances, and set to a glistening score by Glazunov.—*M.H. (kgtheater.dk/xtra)*

TELEVISION

Schitt's Creek

A family affair from Eugene Levy and his son, Dan. Bankruptcy lands the Roses, a family of snobs, in the small town of Schitt's Creek, which the patriarch, Johnny (Eugene Levy), forgot that he even owned. The Canadian sitcom wrapped in April, after six seasons; though it bordered on saccharine in the middle, its last couple of seasons were reinvigorated by the maturation of David

(Dan Levy), a hypebeast who learns to fall in love. The amazingly deranged diction of Catherine O'Hara, as the perpetually verklempt Moira, would make Billy Wilder weep.—*Doreen St. Félix*

Unorthodox

This four-part Netflix miniseries, about a nineteen-year-old woman's escape from her Hasidic community in Brooklyn, is loosely based on the best-selling 2012 memoir by Deborah Feldman, who left the Satmar sect of Hasidic Jews in Williamsburg and ultimately settled in Berlin. Cutting back and forth in time, the show depicts Esty Shapiro (played by Shira Haas, an elfin Israeli actress) as her marriage to the reserved and childish Yanky is arranged and, in excruciating detail, the ways in which her life is monitored and restricted. Esty's flight from Brooklyn has the feel of a thriller, complete with a cat-and-mouse chase as Yanky and his rascally cousin Moishe fly to Germany to pursue her. The city of Berlin is portrayed as a fantasy of secular, multicultural bohemianism, and by the end of the series Esty has assumed the look of a starlet, her pixie cut suddenly chic and paired with red lipstick. But Haas's remarkable performance manages to convey the reserves of pain, both personal and communal, in Esty's story.—*Rachel Syme*

ON TELEVISION



"Central Park," an animated musical sitcom on Apple TV+, cleverly imagines the Olmsted-Vaux oasis as the grand green stage of a fractured folktale. Created by Loren Bouchard and Nora Smith (both of "Bob's Burgers") and Josh Gad (who also performs), it offers a show-opening number that rhapsodically asks, "Where else can your son and daughter / splash in dirty hot-dog water?" The Park's manager, Owen Tillerson (Leslie Odom, Jr.), is an endearing dork of a storybook caretaker; he and his family—a harried journalist wife (Kathryn Hahn) and two cheeky children (Kristen Bell and Tituss Burgess)—live in a castle within its acreage. His antagonist is a splendid sour candy of a villainous zillionaire, Bitsy Brandenham (Stanley Tucci), who stomps around her penthouse while plotting to buy up the Park and desecrate it with condos and commerce. Owen's geeky-dad identity is central to the spirit of the show, with its fight songs of self-actualization and its fine moralizing for the common good. It's got heart in the harmonies and poop-scooper jokes in the uplifting ballads. Like a glorious sugar maple bordering Sheep Meadow, its sap is of an enchanted sort.—*Troy Patterson*

The High Note

The sincere charm of this romantic comedy triumphs over its plodding pace and narrow purview. Dakota Johnson stars as Maggie Sherwood, the personal assistant to Grace Davis (Tracee Ellis Ross), a fabulously popular singer and songwriter whose artistic ambitions are stifled by the safe and profitable course set by her manager, Jack (Ice Cube). Maggie, a lifelong Grace Davis fan, is also an encyclopedic music buff and aspiring producer who reworks Grace's recordings in the studio after hours and inadvertently oversteps her bounds. Meanwhile, she meets a talented but unrecognized young singer, David Cliff (Kelvin Harrison, Jr.), whose material she helps shape—while pretending to be an experienced producer. The resolution seems to have been furnished by an algorithm, though the script, by Flora Greeson, takes some clever detours and adds some hearty dialogue. Johnson offers her familiar yet spontaneous air of earnest innocence; Ross delightfully exudes worldly swagger, and Harrison brings smoldering energy to his thinly sketched role. Directed

by Nisha Ganatra.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, Fandango Now, and other services.)*

The Liberation of L. B. Jones

This drama, from 1970, the last film directed by William Wyler, offers an outraged view of American racial politics. It's set in a small Tennessee town, where a young black man, Sonny Boy Mosby (Yaphet Kotto), returns after a long absence with plans to kill a white police officer who'd brutalized him years earlier. Meanwhile, the town's most prosperous black resident, L. B. Jones (Roscoe Lee Browne), hires a white attorney, Oman Hedgepath (Lee J. Cobb), to represent him in divorce proceedings. L.B.'s wife, Emma (Lola Falana)—a black woman—is having an affair with another white police officer (Anthony Zerbe), whose interests Hedgepath puts ahead of his client's. The drama is centered on the unequal legal system and the violence that results from it, as the town's white authorities view black women as their legitimate prey and brandish the law as a threat to black residents. L.B. is burdened by the memory of a suppressed civil-rights protest; his effort to honor that memory, and Sonny Boy's pursuit of revenge, render the drama diagnostic, confrontational, and agonizing.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon Prime.)*

Manufactured Landscapes

Jennifer Baichwal's documentary about the photographer Edward Burtynsky, from 2006, proves even more revealing than the photographs it celebrates. Tagging along on a trip to China, where Burtynsky takes intricately detailed pictures of colossal industrial activities and their aftermath, she captures the intimate experience of rapid industrialization—the drudgery of exacting factory labor, the inhuman scale of urban development in Shanghai, workers enlisted to destroy their own cities at the Three Gorges Dam—more effectively with her filmed images than he does with his stills. Starting with an eight-minute tracking shot inside a vast, hangarlike factory (an old trick redone joltingly well), she adds a bracing dose of analysis to Burtynsky's tireless legwork. A photograph that he took outside the factory impressively depicts an enormous Riefenstahl-like array of uniformed laborers (organized at the photographer's request), but Baichwal gets close enough to hear a foreman chide his off-duty underlings for the quality of their work.—*R.B. (Streaming on Tubi and Amazon Prime.)*

Something Different

The Czechoslovakian director Věra Chytilová's astonishing first feature, from 1963, is a modernist melodrama about a gymnast, Eva, whose public identity is at odds with her self-image. She's played by the real-life Olympic-champion gymnast Eva Bošáková, and her mother, Vera, is played by the actress Vera Uzelacová; the entire film is an intricate and teeming blend of documentary and fictional portraiture. Eva is preparing for one final competition while dealing with injuries and the demands of athletic life. Vera, a stay-at-home mother, is struggling to care for her young son and to reconnect with her husband when she encounters a tempting single man (in a meet-cute of exquisitely simple comedy). Eva finds an emotional outlet in her performances, which Chytilová showcases with a deft and daring graphic power. The director presents the inner life of gymnastics with startlingly imaginative images that expose, by contrast, the homogenizing banality of televised sports and the emptying of athletic experience that results. In Czech.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

While You Were Sleeping

Trouble on the tracks: Sandra Bullock is a sad and lonely subway clerk (yeah, right) who drags a handsome customer (Peter Gallagher) away from an oncoming train. She's in love with him, but he's in a coma, and his brother (Bill Pullman) falls in love with her. Out of this pleasing confusion, the director, Jon Turteltaub, has fashioned something so simple and predictable that you have no option but to submit. The required resolution is a long time in coming, but there's plenty to keep you diverted, including the light backchat among the semi-weirdos who make up the brothers' family, and Bullock's ridiculously watchable performance. She knows one of the secrets to doing romantic comedy: treating the romance as a good joke. With Peter Boyle, Glynis Johns, and Jack Warden. Released in 1995.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 5/29/95.) (Streaming on Hulu, Amazon, and other services.)*

WHAT TO STREAM



The South Korean director Hong Sang-soo has turned difficulties finding financing into a virtue. Working quickly, on budgets under a hundred thousand dollars, he has become one of the world's most prolific filmmakers—he has made fifteen features in the past decade—and has parlayed his commercial independence into uninhibited artistry. This month, Lincoln Center presents a virtual retrospective of his films, including the U.S. theatrical premiere (on June 12) of his mainly English-language romance **"Hill of Freedom,"** from 2014, one of his most audacious films. It's a brisk tale told with a deft intricacy, in which a young Japanese man travels to Seoul in search of the woman he loves; while waiting for her, he builds new relationships with people he meets there. The story is anchored by a series of letters and sketched in Hong's distinctive style of confrontational dialogue filmed in long takes; its time structure is whimsically but poignantly fractured, and its casual internationalism weaves political history with personal life.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

A Drive-In Grows in Queens 31-91 21st St., Queens

The charmingly chintzy, seafoam-green, neo-Art Deco Bel Aire Diner, which was built in Astoria, Queens, in 1965, has been open all twenty-four hours of every single day since it was purchased, in 1996, by a Greek-American couple named Archie and Patty Dellaportas. In mid-March, when New York City's restaurants were ordered to halt dine-in service, the Bel Aire did not skip a beat in offering takeout, which had long accounted for a sizable portion of its business. "We delivered when only pizza was delivered," Kalergis (Kal) Dellaportas, Archie and Patty's oldest son, who currently runs the place with his brother Peter, told me by phone the other day. "We were one of the first restaurants in Queens to sign up with Seamless."

Still, in the first few weeks of the pandemic, the diner's over-all sales dropped by seventy per cent. Increased takeout orders helped them stay above water, Kal told me, but barely; the Bel Aire has a hundred and eighty seats. One day, he asked his manager, "How can we bring people in without actually bringing

people in?" which led to a light-bulb moment. The diner sits on the edge of a shopping plaza with an ample parking lot. What if, the manager suggested, they turned the lot into a drive-in movie theatre and delivered food to customers in their cars?

And so it came to pass that I sat in my station wagon, one recent evening, dipping steak-cut French fries into ketchup squirted out of packets onto the plastic lid of a precariously balanced to-go container. A girl of about eight, her corkscrew curls pulled into a high ponytail, popped out of a nearby sunroof to dance to Top Forty hits that were blaring from the drive-in's speakers as we waited for the sun to go down. When the sky darkened, I fixed my gaze on a large inflatable movie screen positioned next to a dumpster, onto which directions were projected: tune your car radio to 107.9 FM, keep smoking to a minimum, wear a mask if you need to use the rest room.

The food I ordered on the Bel Aire's Web site after I parked had arrived in a plastic bag via a gloved and masked server, who swung it through my sunroof. (Kal considered putting waitstaff in roller skates but decided it was too complicated; he's looking into trays that hook onto open car windows, like the ones at the Brownstone Pancake Factory, in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, which is currently offering carhop service.) Inside the bag were hefty house-made mozzarella sticks with an unusually high ratio of cheese to crunchy breading and a pair of "Pulp Fiction" cheeseburger sliders,

with iceberg lettuce, tomato, and raw white onion on the side.

The prices on the drive-in menu—which also includes a "Scarface" Cuban and "The Breakfast Club" (an egg, cheese, bacon, ham, and sausage sandwich)—are higher than usual, so that some of the proceeds can go to people in need; the diner recently donated breakfast to the residents of a nursing home across the street. Tickets, which must be reserved online in advance, are thirty-two dollars per vehicle, with a required minimum of two people. The movies have skewed family-friendly and crowd-pleasing: "Grease," "Dirty Dancing," "The Princess Bride."

Count the renaissance of the drive-in among the pandemic's paltry silver linings. Last weekend, the Bel Aire held a "Not So Boozy Brunch: Car Hop Edition" (serving alcohol to people in cars is forbidden in New York), with stuffed French toast and a live d.j. Kal is looking into hosting graduations and has received inquiries from an opera company, a duelling-piano act, and a platinum-selling artist he declined to name on the record. In recent weeks, couples have planned weddings at drive-in theatres in Oklahoma, Utah, and Texas. In the Bronx, the hospitality group that puts on the Bronx Night Market is organizing a "drive-in festival" for later in the summer, featuring film screenings, food, and other entertainment, in parking lots near Yankee Stadium. When I asked Kal what he thought of the competition, he laughed. "If it wasn't us, someone else was gonna do it first," he said. (*Dishes \$9–\$27.*)

—Hannah Goldfield



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT BURNING CITIES

There, yet again, were the flames. Before the furious conflagrations erupted in Minneapolis, the final weeks of May had already seemed like the answer to a grim math problem: What is the product of a crisis multiplied by a crisis? The official mortality count of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States swept toward a hundred thousand, while the economic toll had left forty million people out of work. It was difficult to countenance how so much misery could come about so quickly. But on Memorial Day we became video witnesses to the horrific death of George Floyd, at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department. By Friday, the looted shops, the charred buildings and cars, the smoldering Third Precinct—these were evidence of what the world looks like when a crisis is cubed.

These seemingly disparate American trials are not unrelated; they're bound by their predictability and by the ways in which the Trump Administration has exacerbated them since they began. In March, the President claimed that "nobody knew there would be a pandemic or epidemic of this proportion," and he has echoed that sentiment throughout the course of the emergency. But virtually everyone paying attention to public health saw something like the novel coronavirus coming. In less than two decades, we have seen epidemics of the SARS, MERS, Ebola, and H1N1 viruses. The Obama

Administration created a National Security Council Directorate to mitigate the impact of such events; the Trump Administration largely disbanded it.

On Friday, Trump tweeted that the protesters in Minneapolis were "thugs"—a term with deep-rooted racist connotations—and later noted that the military was present in the city. "When the looting starts," he warned, "the shooting starts." This situation, too, is part of a long-building problem whose warning signs have gone unheeded by the current Administration. Progressives have widely criticized the 1994 Crime Bill, which was spearheaded by Joe Biden, but an element of that legislation has been underappreciated. The 1992 Los Angeles riots broke out after the acquittal of four police officers who had violently assaulted Rodney King (an incident that was also captured on

video). As has often been the case with riots, the chaotic fury in Los Angeles was not simply a response to one incident but an accretion of anger at innumerable issues with a police department which had gone unaddressed for years. The Crime Bill authorized the civil-rights division of the Department of Justice to intervene in the instance of chronically troubled departments, by negotiating consent decrees that laid out specific reforms to be followed, and provided for monitors to oversee their implementation. Like the precursors to the coronavirus, Los Angeles—and later Ferguson and Baltimore—was an indicator of how such problems could play out without intervention. But, in this area as well, the Trump Administration has functioned like a building contractor who can't recognize a load-bearing wall.

In July, 2017, in an address to law-enforcement officers in Suffolk County, New York, Trump told them to use more force when taking suspects into custody. "Like when you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting the head," he said. "You can take the hand away, O.K.?" The following May, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, in a speech to the National Association of Police Organizations, said that the Justice Department "will not malign entire police departments. We will not try to micromanage their daily work." That November, as one of his last acts on the job, Sessions issued a memorandum that severely curtailed the civil-rights division's ability to pursue decrees with police departments. This meant that,



in communities plagued with bad policing, resentments could accrue unchecked by any higher authority until they reached their detonation points. Those detonations tend to resemble the streets of Minneapolis last week.

On Thursday, in a press conference that was short on developments or new information, Erica MacDonald, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Minnesota, said, “To be clear, President Trump as well as Attorney General William Barr are directly and actively monitoring the investigation in this case.” But what, precisely, does that mean? Barr presides over a civil-rights division that has been stripped of its chief mechanism for creating compliance among police officers. In the past five years, the Twin Cities area has seen three other controversial police shootings: of Jamar Clark, in 2015; of Philando Castile, in 2016; and of Justine Damond, in 2017. Each of these fatal

incidents featured a victim of a different racial background from the officers involved, and each was highlighted as an example of police misconduct. Like the COVID cases that emerged in Seattle at the beginning of the year, Minneapolis is a study in the importance of foresight and planning, and an example of what happens when neither of those things occurs.

The President posted his “the shooting starts” tweet early on Friday morning, just hours before Officer Derek Chauvin, who had knelt on George Floyd’s neck for eight minutes, was taken into custody and charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. Twitter, in an unprecedented move, labelled Trump’s tweet a violation of company policy against “glorifying violence.” A Presidential threat to have the United States military shoot civilians is the opposite of leadership, the antithesis of wisdom—a comment

as ill-advised and as detrimental to the public well-being as recommending injecting disinfectant or self-prescribing hydroxychloroquine.

Our problems generally do not stem from treacherous unknowns; they’re the result of a failure to make good use of what is known already. In July, 1967, after a brutal police raid at an after-hours bar in Detroit, that city exploded in retaliatory violence. A month later, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a speech to the American Psychological Association, in which he described riots as “durable social phenomena” that arise in conjunction with discernible conditions—acts of lawlessness that mirror the excesses of those charged with upholding the law. Leaders cannot predict the future, but they can be cognizant of the immediate past, and the possible dangers it suggests. They cannot be clairvoyant. They need only be intelligent.

—Jelani Cobb

DEPT. OF TIME TRAVEL SIX FEET UNDER



From the high ridge in West Orange, New Jersey, where David Mansfield lives, you can see the towers of lower Manhattan on the horizon. Mansfield is a famous musician who plays violin, guitar, pedal steel guitar, mandolin, and Dobro, all of which he has in the basement studio of his ranch-style house on a quiet street. When asked if he went to Juilliard, he replied, “Well, I started touring with Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue when I was nineteen, so . . .” (You can also see him fiddling on roller skates in Michael Cimino’s “Heaven’s Gate.”) He is soft-spoken and slim, with dark eyes and curly brown-and-gray hair.

Both Mansfield and his wife, Maggie, fell ill with COVID-19 in March. She was sicker than he was, but neither needed to be hospitalized. When they got better, he turned to long-neglected projects around the house. She suggested he get rid of some dead

yew trees in the front yard. The yews surrounded a rusty iron pipe, about four and a half feet in diameter, with a round cover, set down vertically in the ground; he assumed it was some kind of drainage pipe. But the more he examined it, once the yews were gone, the odder it seemed. He sent an inquiry to the offices of the Township of West Orange, and a woman there quickly called him back. She had never come across such a thing before. She said that a building permit issued for that address in 1961 allowed for the construction of a steel fallout shelter.

“I looked through some rust holes in the top of the pipe and I saw a ladder,” Mansfield told a recent visitor. “Two of my daughters joined me. The oldest has a film degree, and she filmed me opening the hatch and going down. A lot of vines had grown into the entry tube, and the underground room itself was full of cobwebs, and hundreds of crickets covered the floor and ceiling. I brought in a Shop-Vac and vacuumed everything. The crickets were kind of sluggish, but when I emptied them out into a patch of sunlight they came to life.”

For the visitor’s benefit he lifted the hatch and led the descent. To use the ladder, you turn backward and feel for

the rungs with your feet. At the bottom, there’s a kind of entryway that you duck through, and then you’re in a chamber with an arched ceiling maybe seven feet high. The space is about eight feet across by twelve feet long, and when you talk the sound echoes with a metallic reverb. “Basically, it’s a David Bowie tin can,” Mansfield said. He pointed out a yellow-and-black “FALLOUT SHELTER” sign, of the sort that the Office of Civil Defense used to post in school basements;



David Mansfield

he bought it on Amazon and hung it on the wall to perk up the place. The temperature was a few degrees cooler in the room than the warm spring afternoon aboveground. On the floor in a corner was a small wooden crate, upside down, that said “Hoffman Beverages” on its side.

A short stay in the shelter gives a new appreciation for the birdsong and greenery and breezes up top, in unconfined New Jersey. After climbing out, Mansfield and the visitor sat on the deck behind the house and looked through the trees at the distant new World Trade Center and its neighboring skyscrapers. Maybe the person who installed the bomb shelter imagined escaping into it, staying for the recommended two weeks, and reëmerging to find Manhattan nuked and gone. “Like Charlton Heston, he would come out and look to the east, and say, ‘What have you *done*?’” Mansfield said, holding up his arms beseechingly.

“I did some research, and I found that fallout shelters like this one sold for a hundred and fifty dollars—not a lot, even for the time,” he went on. “Installing a shelter was a patriotic act, so that we Americans could survive a war with the Russians. And then the Cuban missile crisis happened the year after this shelter was installed. Funny to remember when nuclear war was what we worried about—all those drills, putting our heads under our desks in school. It’s weird to be going through this pandemic and sheltering here for a different reason. And nuclear war now seems maybe not so bad. In the bigger picture, climate change will be worse.”

On the corner of the deck stood a wire plant stand. Somewhat rusted, it, too, had been in the fallout shelter. The plant stand’s design recalled the era when objects began to be made of interestingly twisted wire. “That plant stand was the only other object in the fallout shelter, besides the beverage crate,” Mansfield said. “I thought I’d bring it out and put it here.”

He and the visitor regarded the plant stand in silence. After a few moments’ mental sojourn in the sixties, Mansfield added, pensively, “Eddie Haskell just died.”

—Ian Frazier



“Pains me to say it, but Greg is much more interesting as a book.”

THE PICTURES ACCENT QUEEN



A recent Tuesday found the English actress Bel Powley plunked down in an orange-and-navy-blue-patterned armchair in the corner of her bedroom, in the London house where she has been self-isolating with her boyfriend, the actor Douglas Booth. Booth, who is known to American audiences for his role as the hair-metal bad boy Nikki Sixx, in last year’s *Mötley Crüe* biopic, “*The Dirt*,” had just bought a barbecue grill, and Powley was hiding out, hoping that she wouldn’t be asked to help assemble the contraption. (“I was, like, ‘I’m getting out,’” she said cheerfully, over Zoom. “It looked like it was a million pieces, like a spaceship.”) The couple had bought the house toward the end of 2019, and had only been in it for a few months when lockdown went into effect. Powley bobbed from side to side in front of her laptop, attempting to align her head with a large

square hole in the wall behind her, as if to conceal it. “We’re still fixing the place up, can you tell?” she asked. She turned the computer to shakily display another cavity cut out of the wall, meant to be a fireplace but temporarily housing a vase of delphiniums. “We’re getting a mantelpiece this week!” she said. Powley, who is twenty-eight, was born and raised in West London by an actor father and a casting-director mother, but the house is in Dalston, on the city’s eastern side. “In New York terms it would be, like”—she paused—“I feel like I live in Carroll Gardens?” A big laugh.

Powley began her career when she was thirteen, on “*M.I. High*,” a popular BBC kids’ show about teen spies, but, in the decade and a half since, she has had relatively ample opportunity to familiarize herself with the metropolitan landscape of the American coasts. She broke through in the U.S. in 2015, by playing a sexually precocious girl in nineteen-seventies San Francisco, in Marielle Heller’s movie “*The Diary of a Teenage Girl*,” and in 2018 she starred on Broadway as a Queens cop in Kenneth Lonergan’s “*Lobby Hero*.” This summer, she appears in Judd Apatow’s film “*The King*



Bel Powley

of Staten Island,” which will be available on demand on June 12th. Powley plays Kelsey, the sweet but exasperated friend-with-benefits of the traumatized stoner Scott, played by the comedian Pete Davidson, who also co-wrote the screenplay, which is based loosely on his own life as a Staten Island native who lost his fireman father when he was a child. (Davidson’s father died in the Twin Towers on 9/11; in Apatow’s version, Scott’s dad is killed in a house fire.)

With her pale, bare face, relaxed ponytail, and oversized T-shirt bearing the words “Beautiful Is Boring,” Powley seemed like the laid-back British antithesis of the spray-tanned, dolled-up Kelsey. (In one scene, in which Kelsey tries and fails to get Scott’s attention by bringing a Tinder date to the restaurant where he works, she yells, “Look at me! Look at my tits! It’s literally the Eiffel Tower holding them up in here!”) “Kelsey’s look is a *lot*,” Powley said. “When I was preparing for the movie, I became obsessed with ‘Made in Staten Island.’ It’s a reality show basically about the children of the Staten Island Mob.” She held up her phone, which displayed a Googled image of a group of unsmiling, elaborately groomed youngsters. “See? The girls were an inspiration for Kelsey’s look, and it was so much fun to put together: big lips, eyebrows, straight-straight hair, tiny outfits.” But the role never descends into parody. “She has her feet on the ground,” Powley said. “She loves Scott, but she also

knows she can’t save him. She’s strong enough to self-preserve.”

She went on, “I think because, on a fluke, I started my movie career with ‘Diary,’ I’ve been considered since then a lot for American roles. People are always, like, ‘Oh, she can do the accent.’” Powley’s real-life accent, she says, is “probably the most neutral London accent there is. My dad’s family was very middle class.” His father was a surgeon, and his mother was a nurse. “His accent is probably a little bit more posh than mine,” she said. “And, then, my mum grew up in a working-class North London family.” She became animated. “Actually, my great-grandparents on my mum’s side were Orthodox Jews from Russia, and when they were escaping from the pogroms on a boat, heading to New York with all the other Jews, they got off at the wrong stop.” She paused. “Isn’t that insane? The boat docked to refuel in Dublin, and about ten Jewish families got off.” Her grandmother, she says, speaks Yiddish with a thick Irish accent. “On ‘The King of Staten Island,’ one of the makeup artists told me her family had done the same thing!” she said. “So then they were all, like, ‘Fuck, we’re in Dublin.’” Another big laugh, and it was time to go and see if the barbecue grill was in one piece.

—Naomi Fry

PLATFORMS IN THE HOUSE



There have been reports, lately, of people suffering from something called “Zoom fatigue.” It’s a second pandemic we should have seen coming: the video-conferencing tool Zoom, for weeks the most downloaded app in the App Store, has caused widespread burnout.

What to do? One could try this spring’s *second*-most downloaded app and see if it’s any better. Houseparty, launched in 2016, allows users to convene in “rooms” of up to eight people and entertain themselves with virtual board games (including a Pictionary

knockoff) and trivia quizzes. Before the pandemic, Houseparty was a Gen-Z hangout, a mid-tier player in the video-calling leagues. Then the app gained fifty million new users in one month. It’s the virtual living room to Zoom’s virtual office.

On a recent Sunday, a few newbies—an educator in the U.K., an obstetrician in New York City, a P.R. manager for an ovulation-tracking app in Berlin—gathered on Houseparty for a birthday celebration. The app was glitching. “I can’t really hear anyone,” the Berliner said, as he poured himself a glass of sparkling rosé. “Shall we switch to Zoom?”

Three hours later and six thousand miles to the west, Julia Onken was getting ready to do a group workout on Houseparty; she works in marketing for the app. At twenty-six, she was already a little old to be on the app—before the lockdown, she said, ninety per cent of users were under twenty-four, though older generations have since been catching on. As a millennial recently texted a friend, trying to arrange a meeting on Houseparty, “FaceTime is so pre-COVID.”

Onken, who lives in San Francisco, said, “I haven’t left my apartment, but I’m more social than I think I’ve ever been.” The night before, she’d had a first date with a guy who lives three blocks away. “We matched on Bumble, and he suggested FaceTime and wine,” she said. “I was, like, Houseparty and White Claw?”

Houseparty users are encouraged to imagine that they physically inhabit their digital space. Opening the app sends an alert that you are “in the house,” where you can “wave” at others, or, if you like, “ghost” them. As at an actual social event, it can be hard to avoid old acquaintances. Signing up sends a notification to every user who has your number: your boss, your therapist, your ex. Friends can wander into groups at will—or by accident—unless someone “locks the room.” Once inside, it can be hard to hear over the chatter. Despite the cheery prompts that the app provides—“Harry Potter is the same age as Kim Kardashian,” “You can’t hum while holding your nose”—conversation tends toward small talk. An activity helps.

Once Onken was ready, Aimee Jen, a thirty-year-old in black leggings and a baggy gray T-shirt, joined the room. “This is my first time on Houseparty,” she said, through a chirrup of feedback. “I feel so old and uncool.” She, too, was stuck at home, although her dog, a diabetic mutt named George, sometimes forced her out of the house.

At noon, the women opened Instagram and started a live Barry’s Bootcamp class. While Jen fiddled with her volume, Onken performed a series of squats. On Instagram, a muscle-bound instructor shouted into the camera: “Let’s go hard! Hold it! We’ve got eight seconds, then we’re going to lay on the floor, in five! In four! In three! Two! One!” Onken lay on her back with the soles of her feet in closeup. On the other side of the split screen, the dog sauntered into the shot and sat on Jen’s legs.

After catching her breath, Onken was on to her next Houseparty appointment, a pub quiz with college friends in London. “We’ve been hosting these quizzes every few days,” Georgina Coward, a fashion merchandiser, who was quarantining in Southwark, said. “You can get really upset and depressed, or you can just make the most of it.” Her co-host, Fiona Endersen, agreed. “We were finding that conversations went straight back to coronavirus,” she said. “But, with this, people feel like they’ve escaped for an hour.”

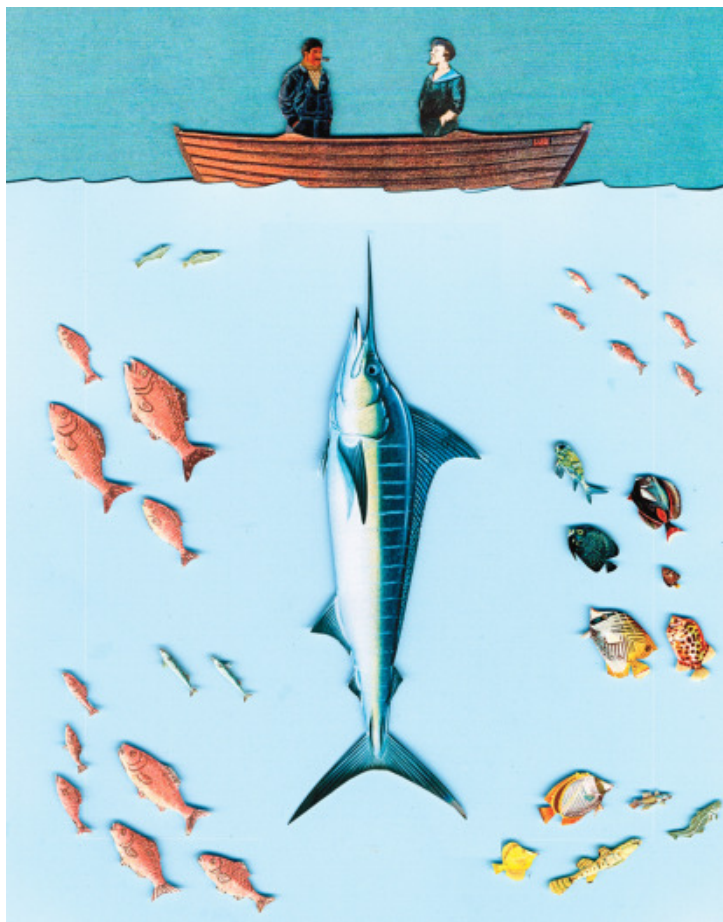
The room filled up, and Coward, holding a big inflatable microphone, started asking questions: Zayn Malik’s age (twenty-seven), the scent of a candle recently released by Gwyneth Paltrow (her own vagina). The contestants, lonely but not alone, slumped on sofas or lounged in bed, half-drunk wineglasses foregrounded in their rectangles of screen. For a sonic round, Coward and Endersen sang snatches from “The Sound of Music.” Onken was stumped. “I don’t know a single musical!” she said.

The first prize, a four-pack of toilet paper, went to Coward’s brother. Endersen told him he could pick it up when the lockdown ended—unless somebody else won it in the meantime. There’d be another quiz next week, she said. “For now, there’s nothing else to do but call people.”

—Fergus McIntosh

SKETCHPAD BY WILL MCPHAIL BLOCK PARTY





FICTION

PURSUIT AS HAPPINESS

BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY

That year we had planned to fish for marlin off the Cuban coast for a month. The month started the tenth of April and by the tenth of May we had twenty-five marlin and the charter was over. The thing to have done then would have been to buy some presents to take back to Key West and fill the Anita with just a little more expensive Cuban gas than was necessary to run across, get cleared, and go home. But the big fish had not started to run.

"Do you want to try her another month, Cap?" Mr. Josie asked. He owned the Anita and was chartering her for ten dollars a day. The standard charter price then was thirty-five a day. "If you want to stay, I can cut her to nine dollars."

"Where would we get the nine dollars?"

"You pay me when you get it. You got good credit with the Standard Oil Company at Belot across the bay, and when we get the bill I can pay them from last month's charter money. If we get bad weather, you can write something."

"All right," I said, and we fished another month. We had forty-two marlin by then and still the big ones had not come. There was a dark, heavy stream close in to the Morro—sometimes there would be acres of bait—and there were flying fish going out from under the bows and birds working all the time. But we had not raised one of the huge marlin, although we were catching, or losing, white

marlin each day and on one day I caught five.

We were very popular along the waterfront because we butchered all our fish and gave them away, and when we came in past the Morro Castle and up the channel toward the San Francisco piers with a marlin flag up we could see the crowd starting to run for the docks. The fish was worth from eight to twelve cents a pound that year to a fisherman and twice that in the market. The day we came in with five flags, the police had to charge the crowd with clubs. It was ugly and bad. But that was an ugly and bad year ashore.

"The goddam police running off our regular clients and getting all the fish," Mr. Josie said. "To hell with you," he told a policeman who was reaching down for a ten-pound piece of marlin. "I never saw your ugly face before. What's your name?"

The policeman gave him his name.

"Is he in the *compromiso* book, Cap?"

"Nope."

The *compromiso* book was where we wrote down the names of the people to whom we had promised fish.

"Write him down in the *compromiso* book for next week for a small piece, Cap," Mr. Josie said. "Now, policeman, you go the hell away from here and club somebody who isn't a friend of ours. I seen enough damn police in my life. Go on. Take the club and the pistol both and get off the dock unless you're a dock police."

Finally, the fish was all butchered and apportioned out according to the book and the book was full of promises for next week.

"You go on up to the Ambos Mundos and get washed up, Cap. Take a shower and I'll meet you there. Then we can go to the Floridita and talk things over. That policeman got on my nerves."

"You come on up and take a shower, too."

"No. I can clean up good here. I didn't sweat like you did today."

So I walked up the cobbled street that was a shortcut to the Ambos Mundos Hotel and checked if I had any mail at the desk and then rode up in the elevator to the top floor. My

room was on the northeast corner and the trade wind blew through the windows and made it cool. I looked out the window at the roofs of the old part of town and across at the harbor and watched the Orizaba go out slowly down the harbor with all her lights on. I was tired from working so many fish and I felt like going to bed. But I knew that if I lay down I might go to sleep, so I sat on the bed and looked out the window and watched the bats hunting and then, finally, I undressed and took a shower and got into some fresh clothes and went downstairs. Mr. Josie was waiting in the doorway of the hotel.

"You must be tired, Ernest," he said.

"No," I lied.

"I'm tired," he said. "Just from watching you pull on fish. That's only two under our all-time record. Seven and the eye of an eighth." Neither Mr. Josie nor I liked to think of the eye of the eighth fish, but we always stated the record in this way.

We were walking up the narrow sidewalk on Obispo Street and Mr. Josie was looking at all the lighted windows of the shops. He never bought anything until it was time to go home. But he liked to look at everything there was for sale. We passed the last two stores and the lottery-ticket office and pushed open the swinging door of the old Floridita.

"You better sit down, Cap," Mr. Josie said.

"No. I feel better standing up at the bar."

"Beer," said Mr. Josie. "German beer. What you drinking, Cap?"

"Frozen daiquiri without sugar."

Constante made the daiquiri and left enough in the shaker for two more. I was waiting for Mr. Josie to bring up the subject. He brought it up as soon as his beer came.

"Carlos says they've got to come in this next month," he said. Carlos was our Cuban mate and a great commercial marlin fisherman. "He says he never saw such a current and when they come they'll be something like we never seen. He says they've got to come."

"He told me, too."

"If you want to try another month, Cap, I can make her eight dollars a

day and I can cook, instead of us wasting money on sandwiches. We can run into the cove for lunch and I'll cook in there. We're getting those wavy-striped bonito all the time. They're as good as little tuna. Carlos says he can pick us up stuff cheap in the market when he goes for bait. Then we can eat supper nights in the Perla of San Francisco restaurant. I ate there good last night for thirty-five cents."

"I didn't eat last night and saved money."

"You got to eat, Cap. That's maybe why you're a little tired today."

"I know it. But are you sure you want to try another month?"

"She don't have to be hauled out for another month. Why should we leave it when the big ones are coming?"

"You have anything you'd rather do?"

"No. You?"

"Do you think they'll really come?"

"Carlos says they've got to come."

"Then suppose we hook one and we can't handle him on this tackle we have."

"We've got to handle him. You can stay with him forever if you eat good. And we're going to eat good. Then I've been thinking about something else."

"What?"

"If you go to bed early and don't have any social life, you can wake up at daylight and start to write and you can get a day's work done by eight o'clock. Carlos and I'll have everything ready to go and you just step on board."

"O.K.," I said. "No social life."

"That social life is what wears you out, Cap. But I don't mean none at all. Just take it on Saturday nights."

"Fine," I said. "Social life on Saturday nights only. Now, what would you suggest I write?"

"That's up to you, Cap. I don't want to interfere with that. You always did good when you worked."

"What would you like to read?"

"Why don't you write good short stories about Europe or out West or when you were on the bum or war or that sort of thing? Why don't you write one about just things that you and I know? Write one about what

the Anita's seen. You could put in enough social life to make it appeal to everybody."

"I'm laying off social life."

"Sure, Cap. But you got plenty to remember. Laying off won't harm you now."

"No," I said. "Thank you very much, Mr. Josie. I'll start working in the morning."

"What I think we ought to do before we start on the new system is for you to eat a big rare steak tonight so you'll be strong tomorrow and wake up wanting to work and fit to fish. Carlos says the big ones can come any day now. Cap, you got to be at your best for them."

"Do you think one more of these would do me any harm?"

"Hell no, Cap. All they got in them is rum and a little lime juice and maraschino. That isn't going to hurt a man."

Just then two girls we knew came into the bar. They were very nice-looking girls and they were fresh for the evening.

"The fishermen," one said in Spanish.

"The two big healthy fishermen in from the sea," the other girl said.

"N.S.L.," Mr. Josie said to me.

"No social life," I confirmed.

"You have secrets?" one of the girls asked. She was an awfully nice-looking girl and in her profile you could not see the slight imperfection where some early friend's right hand had marred the purity of the line of her rather beautiful nose.

"The Cap and I are talking business," Mr. Josie said to the two girls, and they went down to the far end of the bar. "You see how easy it is?" Mr. Josie asked. "I'll handle the social end and all you have to do is get up in the mornings early and write and be in shape to fish. Big fish. The kind that can run over a thousand pounds."

"Why don't we trade," I said. "I'll handle the social end and you get up early in the mornings and write and keep yourself in shape to fish big fish that can run over a thousand pounds."

"I'd be glad to, Cap," Mr. Josie said seriously. "But you're the one of us two that can write. And you're younger

than me and better suited to handle the fish. I'm putting in the boat at just what I figure is the depreciation on the engine, running her the way I do."

"I know it," I said. "I'll try to write well, too."

"I want to keep proud of you," Mr. Josie said. "And I want us to catch the biggest goddam marlin that ever swam in the ocean and weigh him honest and cut him up and give him away to the poor people we know and not one piece to any damn clubbing police in the country."

"We'll do it."

Just then one of the girls waved to us from the far end of the bar. It was a slow night and there was no one but us in the place.

"N.S.L.," Mr. Josie said.

"N.S.L.," I repeated ritually.

"Constante," Mr. Josie said. "Ernesto here wants a waiter. We're going to order a couple of big rare steaks."

Constante smiled and raised his finger for a waiter.

As we passed the girls to go into the dining room, one of them put out her hand and I shook it and whispered solemnly in Spanish, "N.S.L."

"My God," the other girl said. "They're in politics and in a year like this." They were impressed and a little frightened.

In the morning, when the first daylight from across the bay woke me I got up and started to write a short story that I hoped Mr. Josie would like. It had the Anita in it and the waterfront and the things we knew that had happened and I tried to get into it the feeling of the sea and the things we saw and smelled and heard and felt each day. I worked on the story every morning and we fished each day and caught good fish. I trained hard and found all the fish while standing, instead of sitting in a chair. And still the big fish had not come.

One day we saw one towing a commercial fisherman's dinghy, with the dinghy down by the bows and the marlin making splashes as a speedboat would each time he jumped. That one broke off. Another day, in a rain squall, we saw four men trying to hoist one, wide and deep and dark purple,

into a skiff. That marlin dressed out five hundred pounds and I saw the huge steaks cut from him on the marble slab in the old market.

Then, on a sunny day, with a heavy dark stream, the water so clear and in so close that you could see the shoals in the mouth of the harbor ten fathoms deep, we hit our first big fish just outside the Morro. In those days there were no outriggers and no rod holders and I was just letting out a light rig, hoping to pick up a kingfish in the channel, when this fish hit. He came out in a surge and his bill looked like a sawed-off billiard cue. Behind it his head showed huge and he looked as wide as a dinghy. Then he passed us in a rush, with the line cutting parallel to the boat and the reel emptying so fast that it was hot to the touch. There were four hundred yards of fifteen-thread line on the reel and half of it was gone by the time I got into the bow of the Anita.

I got there by holding on to handholds we had built into the top of the house. We had practiced this run and the scramble over the forward deck to where you could brace against the stem of the boat with your feet. But we had never practiced it with a fish that passed you like a subway express when you are at a local station, and with one arm holding the rod, which was bucking and digging into the butt rest, and the other hand and both bare feet braking on the deck as the fish hauled you forward.

"Hook her up, Josie!" I yelled. "He's taking all of it."

"She's hooked up, Cap. There he goes."

By now I had one foot braced against the stem of the Anita and the other leg against the starboard anchor. Carlos was holding me around the waist and ahead of us the fish was jumping. He looked as big around as a wine barrel when he jumped. He was silver in the bright sun and I could see the broad purple stripes down his sides. Each time he jumped he made a splash like a horse falling off a cliff and he jumped and jumped and jumped. The reel was too hot to hold and the core of line on it was getting thinner and thinner in spite of the Anita going full speed after the fish.

"Can you get any more out of her?" I called to Mr. Josie.

"Not in this world," he said. "What you got left?"

"Damn little."

"He's big," Carlos said. "He's the biggest marlin I've ever seen. If he'll only stop. If he'll only go down. Then we'll run up on him and get line."

The fish made his first run from just off the Morro Castle to opposite the National Hotel. That is about the way we went. Then, with less than twenty yards of line on the reel, he stopped and we ran up on him, recovering line all the time. I remember that there was a Grace Line ship ahead of us with the black pilot boat going out to her and I was worried that we might be on her course as she came in. Then I remember watching her while I reeled and then working my way back to the stern and watching the ship pick up her speed. She was coming in well outside of us and the pilot boat would not foul us, either.

Now I was in the chair and the fish was straight up and down and we had a third of the line on the reel. Carlos had poured seawater on the reel to cool it and he poured a bucket of water over my head and shoulders.

"How are you doing, Cap?" Mr. Josie asked.

"O.K."

"You didn't hurt yourself up in the bow?"

"No."

"Did you ever think there was a fish like that?"

"No."

"Grande. Grande," Carlos kept saying. He was trembling like a bird dog, a good bird dog. "I've never seen such a fish. Never. Never. Never."

We did not see him again for an hour and twenty minutes. The current was very strong and it had carried us down to opposite Cojimar, which was about six miles from where the fish first sounded. I was tired but my hands and feet were in good shape and I was getting line on him now quite steadily, being careful never to pull harshly or to jerk. I could move him now. It wasn't easy. But it was possible if you kept the

PRAYING

These two things happened when I was twenty-five, during a time when I would do free-associative book searches at the Multnomah County Library, in Oregon. The search always began when I entered the lobby, triggered by the first word I overheard. So, if someone was talking about having “branzino for dinner,” I’d search “branzino” on the clunky computers, and then scan the author names until I came upon someone who shared a first or last name with someone I knew, and then sometimes not even check out that book but open it at random, stab my finger at a page, and search for whatever word I hit, etc., etc., until I finally landed on something recommended by my great friend the universe. I wasn’t showy about my technique, but if anyone had been interested I’d have very willingly elaborated, maybe as the start of a longer conversation. It was right after I had checked out one of these conjured books that a security guard swooped up beside me. This had happened elsewhere, more than once, but one couldn’t steal from the library, so I was almost certain I was innocent this time. He scanned the area and then, in a low voice, told me that I was being followed.

“By you?” I whispered.

“No, by a man with a blue backpack. We’ve been watching on the cameras.”

“You were watching me?”

“Only once we noticed you were being followed. He’s gone now, but, since you’re leaving, too, we wanted you to be aware.”

I glanced around.

“Maybe you want to call a friend to pick you up, depending on how you were planning on getting home.”

It sounded to me like I already had a friend to pick me up; he was wearing a blue backpack. I mean, those weren’t my exact thoughts, but I had a hard time understanding that this was bad, not good, news. I had thought I was on a lonely, possibly pointless vision quest, so the news that someone had been faithfully following my serpentine path and that both of us had been watched over by multiple cameras? It was like those stories of models being discovered while shopping for jeans at the mall. Anything could happen! I was a person who hoped to have many followers someday—this guy was just early, ahead of his time. The guard waited with me until my bus came and then I got on it, a minor celebrity—well, not really, but happy.

The second thing happened a week later, same library, but this time as I was coming in. I was probably returning the book I had been followed finding and now my ears were poised, ready to receive a new first word. But instead this happened: a large man walking in front of me fell backward, such that I had to sit down very quickly and kind of catch his head in my lap before letting it slide to the floor in front of my knees. He was having a stroke or a heart attack. He wasn’t alone; there was another, very



small man with him, whose first language wasn’t English. They seemed dislocated, homeless, or maybe just travelers, passing through. The small man and I both shouted, “Help!” and “Does anyone know CPR?” One lady said, “I do, but I don’t feel very confident about my skills,” and slunk away. Eventually, a security guard arrived—it wasn’t the same one—and then several more eons passed while we waited for an ambulance. In the meantime, this big man’s sweaty face turned a kind of gray-blue, and the small man began to lose it in the way you do when seconds might save the person you love most in the world. He was wringing his hands, like in the cartoons, and whimpering, and every so often he would turn to me and say, “What do we do? What do we do?”

I’m twenty-five, I’m still twenty-five, like the week before, so I have no idea what to do, but I know what he means—to do nothing, well, that isn’t enough. So I said, “Let’s pray.” He looked at me with a kind of insane hope, like maybe I had powers, maybe I knew God personally. I laid both my hands on his friend’s massive shoulders and bowed my head. The small man did the same. I’d only ever seen praying in movies, but it’s basically begging, right? That’s what I did—I begged with all my heart for the man to live, knowing that he was dying, right there against my knees, under my hands, on the library floor.

The E.M.T.s asked if we were both going in the ambulance, and I said no, of course, and the little man hurried off with the stretcher. I just stood there for a few minutes and very quickly there were all new people in the lobby and none of them knew what they had narrowly missed. A man walked past with a backpack. It wasn’t blue, but I got a bad feeling anyway. Yes, anything could happen, but also: *anything could happen*. So I left. What was I going to do? Random book search? No, I never did that again. Not that I grew up all at once right then, but some things punch you in the face and you fly through the air and land somewhere completely different. You walk on from there. ♦

line just this side of the breaking point.

"He's going to come up," Carlos said. "Sometimes the great ones do that and you can gaff them while they are still innocent."

"Why does he come up now?" I asked.

"He's puzzled," Carlos said. "And you're leading him. He doesn't know what it is about."

"Don't ever let him find out," I said.

"He'll weigh over nine hundred dressed out," Carlos said.

"Keep your mouth off of him," Mr. Josie said. "You don't want to work him any different, Cap?"

"No."

When we saw him we knew how really big he was. You couldn't say it was frightening. But it was awesome. We saw him slow and quiet and almost unmoving in the water with his great pectoral fins like two long purple scythe blades. Then he saw the boat and the line started to race off the reel as though we were hooked to a motorcar, and he started jumping out to the northwest with the water pouring from him at each jump.

I had to go into the bow again and we chased him until he sounded. This time he went down almost opposite the Morro. Then I worked my way back to the stern again.

"Do you want a drink, Cap?" Mr. Josie asked.

"No," I said. "Get Carlos to put some oil in the reel and not spill it and put some more salt water on me."

"Can't I get you anything really, Cap?"

"Two hands and a new back," I said. "The son of a bitch is as fresh as he was at the start."

The next time we saw him was an hour and a half later, well past Cojimar, and he jumped and ran again and I had to go into the bow while we chased him.

When I got back to the stern and could sit down again, Mr. Josie said, "How is he, Cap?"

"He's just the same as always. But the temper is starting to go out of the rod."

The rod was bent like a full-drawn bow. But now, when I lifted, it did not straighten as it should.

"She's still got some left," Mr. Josie

said. "You can stick with him forever, Cap. You want some more water on your head?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm worried about the rod. His weight has just taken the temper out."

An hour later the fish was coming in steadily and well and he was making big slow circles.

"He's tired," Carlos said. "He's going to come in easy now. The jumping has filled up his air sacs and he can't go deep."

"The rod's gone," I said. "She won't straighten at all now."

It was true. The rod's tip now touched the surface of the water and when you lifted to raise the fish and to reel to take up line the rod did not react. It was not a rod anymore. It was like a projection of the line. It was still possible to gain a few inches of line each time you lifted. But that was all.

The fish was moving in slow circles and as he moved on the outgoing half of the circle he took line off the reel. On the incoming circle you gained it back. But with the temper gone out of the rod you could not punish him and you had no command over him at all.

"It's bad, Cap," I said to Mr. Josie. We called each other Cap interchangeably. "If he decided to go down now to die we'd never get him up."

"Carlos says he's coming up. He says he caught so much air jumping



he can't go deep and die. He says that this is the way the big ones always act at the end when they've jumped a lot. I counted him jumping thirty-six times and maybe I missed some."

This was one of the longest speeches I had ever heard Mr. Josie make and I was impressed. Just then the big fish started down and down and down. I was braking with both hands on the drum of the reel and

keeping the line almost at breaking point and feeling the metal of the reel drum revolve in slow jerks under my fingers.

"How's the time?" I asked Mr. Josie.

"You've been with him three hours and fifty minutes."

"I thought you said he couldn't go down and die," I said to Carlos.

"Hemingway, he has to come up. I know he has to come up."

"Tell him so," I said.

"Get him some water, Carlos," Mr. Josie said. "Don't talk, Cap."

The ice water felt good and I spat it out onto my wrists and told Carlos to pour the rest of the glass on the back of my neck. Sweat salted the places on my shoulders where the harness had rubbed them bare but it was so hot in the sun that there was no warm feeling from the blood. It was a July day and the sun was at noon.

"Put some more salt water on his head," Mr. Josie said. "With a sponge."

Just then the fish stopped taking out line. He hung steady for a time, feeling as solid as though I were hooked to a concrete pier, and then slowly he started up. I recovered the line, reeling with the wrist alone, as there was no spring in the rod at all and it was as limp as a weeping willow.

When the fish was about a fathom under the surface, so that we could see him looking like a long purple-striped canoe with two great jutting wings, he started to circle slowly. I held all the tension I could on him, to try to shorten the circle. I was holding up to that absolute hardness that indicates the breaking strength of the line when the rod let go. It did not break sharply or suddenly. It just collapsed.

"Cut thirty fathoms of line off the big rig," I said to Carlos. "I'll hold him on the circles and when he's coming in we can get enough line to make this line fast to the big line and I'll change rods."

There was no question anymore of catching the fish as a world's record or any other sort of record, since the rod was broken. But he was a whipped fish now and on the heavy gear we should get him. The only problem was that the big rod was too stiff for the fifteen-thread line. That was

my problem and I would have to work it out.

Carlos was stripping white thirty-six-thread line off the big Hardy reel, measuring it with his arms extended as he pulled it out through the guides of the rod and dropped it on the deck. I held the fish all that I could with the useless rod and saw Carlos cut the white line and pull a long length of it through the guides.

"All right, Cap," I said to Mr. Josie. "You take this line now when he comes in on his circle and take in enough so Carlos can make the two lines fast. Just take it in soft and easy."

The fish came in steadily as he rounded on his circle and Mr. Josie brought the line in foot by foot and passed it to Carlos, who was knotting it to the white line.

"He's got them tied," Mr. Josie said. He still had about a yard of the green fifteen-thread line to spare and was holding the live line in his fingers as the fish came to the inside limit of his circle. I broke my hands loose from the small rod, laid it down, and took the big rod that Carlos handed me.

"Cut away when you are ready," I said to Carlos. To Mr. Josie I said, "Let your slack out soft and easy, Cap, and I'll use a light, light drag until we get the feel of it."

I was watching the green line and the great fish when Carlos cut. Then I heard a cry such as I have never heard a sane human being make. It was as though you could distill all despair and make it into a sound. Then I saw the green line slowly going through Mr. Josie's fingers and then watched it go on down, down, and out of sight. Carlos had cut the wrong loop of the knots he had made. The fish was out of sight.

"Cap," Mr. Josie said. He did not look very well. Then he looked at his watch. "Four hours and twenty-two minutes," he said.

I went down to see Carlos. He had been vomiting in the head and I told him not to feel bad, that it could happen to anyone. His brown face was all tied up and he was talking in a low strange voice so I could hardly hear him.

"All my life fishing and I never saw



AS Gregor Samsa awoke at 3:43 P.M. from a nap, he found himself feeling weirdly even more tired, out of it, and hungry at this frustrating hour between lunch and dinner...

such a fish and I did that. I've ruined your life and my life."

"Hell," I told him. "You mustn't talk nonsense like that. We'll catch plenty of bigger fish." But we never did.

Mr. Josie and I sat in the stern and let the Anita drift. It was a lovely day on the Gulf, with only a light breeze, and we looked at the shoreline with the small mountains showing behind it. Mr. Josie was putting Mercurochrome on my shoulders and on my hands, where they had stuck to the rod, and on the soles of my bare feet, where the skin was chafed through. Then he mixed two whiskey sours.

"How's Carlos?" I asked.

"He's pretty broke up. He's just crouching down there."

"I told him not to blame himself."

"Sure. But he's down there blaming himself."

"How do you like the big ones now?" I asked.

"It's all I ever want to do," Mr. Josie said.

"Did I handle her all right for you, Cap?"

"Hell yes."

"No. Tell me true."

"The charter's supposed to be up today. Now I'll fish for nothing, if you want."

"No."

"I'd rather it was that way. Do you remember him going up toward the National Hotel like nothing in the world?"

"I remember everything about him."

"Have you been writing good, Cap? It isn't too hard doing it in the early mornings?"

"I've been writing as good as I can."

"You keep it up and everybody is all right for always."

"I may lay off it tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"My back's bad."

"Your head's all right, isn't it? You don't write with your back."

"My hands will be sore."

"Hell, you can hold a pencil. You'll find in the morning you'll probably feel like it."

Strangely enough I did and I worked well and we were out of the harbor at eight o'clock and it was another perfect day, with just a light breeze and the current close to the Morro Castle,

as it had been the day before. On that day we didn't put out any light rig when we hit the clear water. We had done that once too often. I slacked out a big cero mackerel, which weighed about four pounds, from the one really big outfit we had. It was the heavy Hardy rod and the reel with the white thirty-six-thread line. Carlos had spliced back on the thirty fathoms of line he had taken off the day before and the five-inch reel was full. The only trouble was that the rod was too stiff. In big-game fishing a rod that is too stiff kills the angler, while a rod that bends properly kills the fish.

Carlos spoke only when spoken to and he was still in his sorrow. I could not afford my sorrow because I ached too much and Mr. Josie was never much of a man for sorrow.

"All he's been doing all morning is shaking his goddam head," he said. "He's not going to bring any fish back that way."

"How do you feel, Cap?" I asked.

"I feel good," Mr. Josie said. "I went uptown last night and sat and listened to that all-girl orchestra on the square and drank a few bottles of beer and then I went to Donovan's. There was hell in there."

"What kind of hell?"

"No-good hell. Bad. Cap, I'm glad you weren't along."

"Tell me about it," I said, holding the rod well out to the side and high so that the big mackerel skipped at the edge of the wake. Carlos had turned the Anita to follow the edge of the stream along past the fortress of Cabañas. The white cylinder of the teaser was jumping and darting in the wake and Mr. Josie had settled in his chair and was slacking out another big mackerel bait on his side of the stern.

"In Donovan's there was a man claimed he was a captain in the secret police. He said he liked my face and he said he'd kill any man in the place for me as a present. I tried to quiet him down. But he said he liked me and he wanted to kill somebody to prove it. He was one of those special Machado police. Those clubbing police."

"I know them."

"I guess you do, Cap. Anyway, I'm glad you weren't there."

"What did he do?"

"He kept wanting to kill somebody to show how much he liked me and I kept telling him it wasn't necessary and to just have a drink and forget about it. So he would quiet down a little and then he would want to kill somebody again."

"He must have been a nice fellow."

"Cap, he was worthless. I tried to tell him about the fish so as to take his mind off it. But he said, 'Shit on your fish. You never had any fish. See?' So I said, 'O.K., shit on the fish. Let's settle for that and you and me both go home.' 'Go home hell!' he says. 'I'm going to kill somebody for you as a present and shit on the fish. There wasn't any fish. You got that straight?' So then I said good night to him, Cap, and I gave my money to Donovan and this policeman knocks it off the bar onto the floor and puts his foot on it. 'Like hell you're going home,' he said. 'You're my friend and you're going to stay here.' So I said good night to him and I said to Donovan, 'Donovan, I'm sorry your money's on the floor.' I didn't know what this policeman would try to do and I didn't care. I was going home. So as soon as I start for home this policeman hauls out his gun and starts to pistol-whip a poor damn Gallego who was in there drinking a beer and who'd never opened his mouth all night. Nobody did anything to the policeman. I didn't, either. I'm ashamed, Cap."

"It isn't going to last much longer now," I said.

"I know it. Because it can't. But what I didn't like the most was that policeman saying he liked my face. What the hell kind of face have I got, Cap, that a policeman like that would say he liked it?"

I liked Mr. Josie's face very much, too. I liked it more than the face of almost anybody I knew. It had taken me a long time to appreciate it because it was a face that had not been sculptured for a quick or facile success. It had been formed at sea, on the profitable side of bars, playing cards with other gamblers, and by enterprises of great risk conceived and undertaken with cold and exact intelligence. No part of the face was handsome except the eyes, which were a lighter and stranger blue than the Mediter-

anean is on its brightest and clearest day. The eyes were wonderful and the face certainly not beautiful and now it looked like blistered leather.

"You have a good face, Cap," I said. "Probably the only good thing about that son of a bitch was that he could see it."

"Well, I'm going to stay out of joints now until this business is over," Mr. Josie said. "Sitting there on the square with the all-girl orchestra and that girl who sings, it was fine and wonderful. How do you really feel, Cap?"

"I feel pretty bad," I said.

"It didn't hurt you in the gut? I was worried always when you were in the bow."

"No," I said. "It's in the roots of the back."

"The hands and feet don't amount to anything and I bandaged up the harness," Mr. Josie said. "It won't chafe as bad. Did you really work O.K., Cap?"

"Sure," I said. "It's a hell of a habit to get into and it's just about as hard to get out."

"I know a habit is a bad thing," Mr. Josie said. "And work probably kills more people than any other habit. But with you when you do it then you don't give a damn about anything else."

I looked at the shore and we were off a lime kiln, close to the beach where the water was very deep and the Gulf Stream made it almost to shore. There was a little smoke coming up from the kiln and I could see the dust of a truck moving along the rock road on the shore. Some birds were working over a patch of bait. Then I heard Carlos shout, "Marlin! Marlin!"

We all saw him at the same time. He was very dark in the water and, as I watched, his bill came out of the water behind the big mackerel. It was an ugly bill, round and thick and short, and the fish behind it bulked under the surface.

"Let him have it!" Carlos yelled. "He's got it in his mouth."

Mr. Josie was reeling his bait in and I was waiting for the tension that would mean that the marlin had really taken the mackerel. ♦

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A conversation with the author's grandson.



LETTER FROM REYKJAVÍK

INDEPENDENT PEOPLE

How Iceland managed to beat the curve.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

On the morning of Friday, February 28th, Evar Pálmi Pálmason, a detective with the Reykjavík police department, was summoned by his boss. Iceland did not yet have a confirmed case of COVID-19, but the country's Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management wanted to be prepared. Suppose somebody tested positive? A team would be needed to track down everyone with whom that person had been in contact. Pálmason's supervisor told him he was going to lead that team.

"We were just talking: 'If and when the first case happens—it could be this

week, we just don't know,'" Pálmason recalled. "And then, two hours later, we got the call." A man who'd recently been skiing in the Dolomites had become the country's first known coronavirus patient.

Two other cops, two nurses, and a criminologist had been assigned to Pálmason's team. "With our detective techniques to find people, we began to gather some information from the case," Pálmason told me. The man, the team learned, had been back in Iceland for several days before he'd been diagnosed. During that time, he'd done all the things people normally do—gone to

work, met with colleagues, run errands.

Anyone who'd spent more than fifteen minutes near the man in the days before he'd experienced his first symptoms was considered potentially infected. ("Near" was defined as within a radius of two metres, or just over six feet.) The team came up with a list of fifty-six names. By midnight, all fifty-six contacts had been located and ordered to quarantine themselves for fourteen days.

The first case was followed by three more cases, then by six, and then by an onslaught. By mid-March, confirmed COVID cases in Iceland were increasing at a rate of sixty, seventy, even a hundred a day. As a proportion of the country's population, this was far faster than the rate at which cases in the United States were growing. The number of people the tracing team was tracking down, meanwhile, was rising even more quickly. An infected person might have been near five other people, or fifty-six, or more. One young woman was so active before she tested positive—going to classes, rehearsing a play, attending choir practice—that her contacts numbered close to two hundred. All were sent into quarantine.

The tracing team, too, kept growing, until it had fifty-two members. They worked in shifts out of conference rooms in a Reykjavík hotel that had closed for lack of tourists. To find people who had been exposed, team members scanned airplane manifests and security-camera footage. They tried to pinpoint who was sitting next to whom on buses and in lecture halls. One man who fell ill had recently attended a concert. The only person he remembered having had contact with while there was his wife. But the tracing team did some sleuthing and found that after the concert there had been a reception.

"In this gathering, people were hugging, and eating from the same trays," Pálmason told me. "So the decision was made—all of them go into quarantine." If you were returning to Iceland from overseas, you also got a call: put yourself in quarantine. At the same time, the country was aggressively testing for the virus—on a per-capita basis, at the highest rate in the world.

Iceland never imposed a lockdown. Only a few types of businesses—night

Swimmers at Laugardalslaug, a public pool in Reykjavík, on May 18th.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VALDIMAR THORLACIUS

THE NEW YORKER, JUNE 8 & 15, 2020

25

clubs and hair salons, for example—were ever ordered closed. Hardly anyone in Reykjavík wears a mask. And yet, by mid-May, when I went to talk to Pálmason, the tracing team had almost no one left to track. During the previous week, in all of Iceland, only two new coronavirus cases had been confirmed. The country hadn't just managed to flatten the curve; it had, it seemed, virtually eliminated it.

I had initially planned to go to Iceland in March, for a story unconnected to the coronavirus. Suddenly, the trip was called off. The European Union was barring Americans from entering, and the United States was barring Europeans. Flights were being cancelled. There didn't seem any way to resurrect the trip, until it occurred to me: what if I wrote about Iceland's response to COVID-19?

I looked online and learned that all those entering the country were required to submit a form outlining how they planned to quarantine for two weeks. I applied to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for an exemption as a journalist. The answer came back: no.

I did some e-mailing and phoning around. Iceland, which has three hundred and sixty-five thousand residents—about half the population of Denver—is a famously tight-knit country. Almost everyone, quite literally, is related to everyone else, and if two people want to know how exactly their families are intertwined they can consult a genealogy database run by an Icelandic biotech firm called deCODE Genetics. Iceland was able to test so many people because, at the height of the outbreak, deCODE turned its state-of-the-art facilities over to screening for the virus. I got in touch

with the head of the firm, Kári Stefánsson, a neurologist and a national celebrity. He told me that he would work things out.

A few days later, the no became a yes, with qualifications. I'd have to enter a "modified" quarantine for journalists. The list of rules ran four single-spaced pages and included provisos on how to use—or, really, not use—public rest rooms. It laid out a half-dozen scenarios—"interview of a public figure in a private company setting," "interview of any person in a private setting out of doors"—with detailed instructions for how each one should be handled. An "interview of a public servant in the workplace" was allowed, but with numerous conditions. ("The director of the public entity must be informed and assent to the interview even if they are not the interviewee. . . . The journalist should not explore the site, even with a guide, but only visit the space designated for the interview.")

Icelandair had, by this time, suspended service from the United States, except for sporadic flights out of Boston. The day I left, a Saturday, the international terminal at Logan was as solemn and silent as a mausoleum. Not a single ticket desk was open. On the plane, I counted fourteen seats occupied, out of nearly two hundred. I spoke briefly with a woman seated a few rows in front of me. She was going to visit her fiancé, an Icelandic soccer player, and was unhappy that they would be spending the first two weeks of her stay in separate apartments.

The in-flight magazine, which apparently hadn't been replaced for several months, was filled with pictures of vacationers in the snow. It read like an

illuminated manuscript—a relic from another era. One of the crew members told me that he and almost all of his colleagues, including the pilots, had been given three months' notice; they were working only occasional flights. Despite the generalized gloom, it was thrilling to be going somewhere; for the previous eight weeks, the farthest I'd travelled was to the liquor store.

When we landed at Keflavík, Iceland's international airport, I faced my first crisis of conscience. Among the many proscribed activities for me, I knew, was shopping. But it was nearly 10 P.M., and Icelandair had cancelled the flight's meal service. Was I allowed into the duty-free store? I decided that I was. Dinner that night was beer and licorice.

The next day, Stefánsson offered to pick me up at my hotel. (Crisis No. 2: "Even those being interviewed should maintain 2 metres distance from the journalist in quarantine as much as possible.") As soon as I got into his Porsche, he asked me where I was from. I said western Massachusetts. "Massachusetts is probably the most boring place on earth," he declared.

Stefánsson, who is seventy-one, is tall and broad-shouldered, with white hair and a white, Hemingwayesque beard. For most of the eighties and nineties, he lived in the U.S., teaching first at the University of Chicago and then at Harvard. He returned to Iceland with the notion of using the country's small, inbred population to study the connection between disease and genetic variation. This was before the human genome had been fully sequenced, and Stefánsson was sailing into uncharted waters. He founded deCODE, and it grew into a large company, which, like much of the rest of Iceland, went bankrupt following the financial crisis of 2008. DeCODE is now owned by an American biotech company, Amgen; its offices are in a sleek, metal-clad building not far from Reykjavík's municipal airport. Refrigerated storage rooms in the basement hold blood samples from a hundred and eighty thousand Icelanders—roughly one of every two people in the country.

Stefánsson told me that he'd decided to get involved in COVID-19 research a few days after Iceland's first case was



"How much more grass do we have to eat before we get thin?"

announced. He was driving to his office one morning when he heard on the radio an estimate of the virus's fatality rate. "They predicted that 3.4 per cent of those who were infected would die," Stefánsson recalled. "And I couldn't understand how they could calculate the death rate, not knowing the distribution of the virus in society. So when I came to work I sat down with my colleagues. And I told them we should offer to screen the general population in Iceland."

Iceland's university hospital was already testing people who had symptoms of COVID-19. But by testing people who had no symptoms, or only very mild ones, deCODE picked up many cases that otherwise would have been missed. These cases, too, were referred to the tracing team. By May 17th, Iceland had tested 15.5 per cent of its population for the virus. In the U.S., the figure was 3.4 per cent.

Meanwhile, deCODE was also sequencing the virus from every Icelander whose test had come back positive. As the virus is passed from person to person, it picks up random mutations. By analyzing these, geneticists can map the disease's spread. At the beginning of the outbreak, travellers returning to Iceland from the Italian Alps seemed to be the primary source of infections. But researchers at deCODE found that, while attention had been focussed on Italy, the virus had been quietly slipping into the country from several other nations, including Britain. Travellers from the West Coast of the U.S. had brought in one strain, and travellers from the East Coast another. The East Coast strain had been imported to America from Italy or Austria, then exported back to Europe.

By sequencing the virus from every person infected, researchers at deCODE could also make inferences about *how* it had spread. "One of the very interesting things is that, in all our data, there are only two examples where a child infected a parent," Stefánsson told me. "But there are lots of examples where parents infected children."

Stefánsson is a frequent critic of the Icelandic government. He often fires off opinion pieces to newspapers, on subjects ranging from the management of fisheries to hospital financing. (A few years ago, he circulated a petition de-

manding that the government spend more on health care, and a third of the country's adult population signed it.) At any given moment, he's almost sure to be wrangling with one ministry or another; in March, when the Icelandic Data Protection Authority said that it couldn't rule immediately on a request from deCODE, Stefánsson issued a lengthy denunciation on Facebook. But, when I asked Stefánsson about the Icelandic government's response to COVID-19, he had only kind words.

"This was done in an extremely balanced way," he said at one point. "And I think the authorities did pretty much everything right." At another point, he told me, "The remarkable thing in this whole affair is that in Iceland it has been run entirely by the public-health authorities. They came up with the plan, and they just instituted it. And we were fortunate that our politicians managed to control themselves."

In Reykjavík, I stayed at one of the few hotels that were open, in an Art Deco building not far from the parliament. One evening, upon returning to the hotel, I found a film crew and a jumble of equipment blocking the hallway. In front of the cameras stood two middle-aged men and a woman, all dressed in white terry-cloth bathrobes. Though I'd been in Iceland for only two days, I recognized them. They were the team who had guided Iceland's response to COVID-19: the country's director of emergency management, Víðir Reynisson; its chief epidemiologist, Þórólfur Guðnason; and its director of health, Alma Möller.

Reynisson, Guðnason, and Möller worked together out of an improvised COVID command center in the offices of the Icelandic Coast Guard. Through March, April, and much of May, they gave a joint briefing every day at 2 P.M., at which they discussed, matter-of-factly, what they knew and what they didn't. Sometimes they invited guests, such as a psychologist who spoke about how to talk to kids about the pandemic. On occasion, they warned about misinformation—for instance, the potentially

fatal consequences of attempting to fight the virus by drinking bleach. Three-quarters of Icelanders tuned in at some point. Reynisson, Guðnason, and Möller became so well known that they were referred to simply as the "trio," or the "tripod," or, as one person put it to me, the "holy trinity."

That evening, the holy trinity had put on bathrobes to attempt another miraculous rescue. About forty per cent of Iceland's export revenue comes from tourism. To make up for all the Americans and English and Germans who would be staying home because of COVID-19, the government had commissioned a commercial to encourage Icelanders to travel domestically over the summer.

Reynisson, Guðnason, and Möller went into separate rooms—Reynisson on one side of the hall, the two others on the opposite side. At the count of *þrír, tveir, einn*, they were supposed to open their doors, bedroom-farce style. Then Reynisson was to look into the camera and deliver the punch line: "We'll come along, just in case." (Each time he did so, the camera crew cracked up; I had to assume it was funnier in Icelandic.) As one take followed another, I tried to picture the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Anthony Fauci; the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Redfield; and the White House coronavirus-response coordinator, Deborah Birx, in terry cloth.

As it happened, I had an appointment the next morning to speak to Möller. She was back in her own office, in a sleek glass tower by the harbor. The first thing she said when I sat down was "I'm so sorry. I knew from early February that the U.S. would be in great trouble." Möller is an intensive-care physician by training; in 1990, she became the first woman to serve as a helicopter doctor with Iceland's Coast Guard. The job entailed such tasks as being lowered in a harness onto fishing boats in the North Atlantic to treat sick crew members. In 2018, she became the country's first female director of health.

Möller pulled up a series of graphs and charts on her laptop. These showed



that, per capita, Iceland had had more COVID-19 cases than any other Scandinavian country, and more than even Italy or Britain. There was an outbreak in a nursing home in the town of Bolungarvík, in northwestern Iceland, and one in the Westman Islands, an archipelago off the southern coast, which seemed to have started at a handball game. (In Europe, handball is a team sport that's sort of a cross between basketball and soccer.)

"The numbers in the beginning were terrible," Möller said. She attributed the country's success in bringing the case-load down in part to having got an early start. The "trio," along with officials from Iceland's university hospital, had begun meeting back in January. "We saw what was going on in China," she recalled. "We saw the pictures of people lying dead in emergency departments, even on the street. So it was obvious that something terrible was happening. And, of course, we didn't know if it would spread to other countries. But we didn't dare take the chance. So we started preparing." For example, it was discovered that the country didn't have enough protective gear for its health-care workers, so hospital officials immediately set about buying more.

Meanwhile, Möller began assembling a "backup" team. "You know, everybody knows everyone in Iceland," she said. "And so I rang up the president of the Icelandic Medical Association and the head of the nurses' association." Doctors who had recently retired, nurses who had gone on to other jobs—all were urged to sign up. When new cases started to be diagnosed in a great rush, the backup team, along with doctors whose offices had been shut by the pandemic, counselled people over the phone. "If you were seventy, if you had high blood pressure, you got called every day," Möller told me. "But, if you were young and healthy, maybe twice a week. And I'm sure that this led to fewer hospital admittances and even to fewer intensive-care admittances."

This, in turn, appears to have cut down on fatalities. Iceland's death rate from COVID-19 is one out of every one hundred and eighty confirmed cases, or just 0.56 per cent—one of the lowest in the world. The figure is so low that it raised some doubts. Möller's depart-

ment decided to look into how many Icelanders had perished for any reason since the outbreak began. It turned out that over-all mortality in Iceland had actually gone *down* since the coronavirus had arrived.

I asked Möller about masks. In Massachusetts, an executive order issued by the governor requires that masks be worn by anyone entering a store, taking a cab, or using public transit, and violators can be fined up to three hundred dollars. In Iceland, masks aren't even part of the public conversation. Möller said that wearing one might be advisable for a person who is sick and coughing, but that person shouldn't be walking around in public anyway. "We think they don't add much and they can give a false sense of security," she said. "Also, masks work for some time, and then they get wet, and they don't work anymore."

Möller was careful not to suggest that Iceland had beaten the virus. She seemed almost embarrassed by the idea of claiming credit for herself, for the trio, or for Iceland. The furthest she would go, when pressed, was to say, "We are a nation that's used to catastrophes. We deal with avalanches, earthquakes, eruptions, and so on." Among the slides she showed me about the country's experience with COVID was one labelled "Success?"

Iceland was one of the last (more or less) habitable places on earth to be settled by humans, sometime toward the end of the ninth century. Genetic analysis performed by deCODE shows that the island's original inhabitants were mainly men from Norway and women from the British Isles. (It seems likely that the women were seized by the Vikings and brought along by force.)

For centuries, hardly anyone from anywhere else bothered to travel to Iceland; it just didn't seem worth the effort. Isolation, combined with low population density, tended to keep out epidemics—the island was, for example, spared the Black Death. But, when disease did slip in, the effects on a population that lacked immunity could be devastating. In 1707, an Icelander contracted smallpox during a trip to Copenhagen. He died on his way home and was buried at sea. His clothes continued on to the town of Eyrarbakki,

on the island's southern coast, sparking an outbreak that, by 1709, had killed about a quarter of the country.

Today, Iceland is still far from anywhere. Its nearest neighbor, Greenland, is mostly ice, and the capital city of Nuuk is almost nine hundred miles away. But jets and cruise ships have turned Reykjavík into a bucket-list destination; last year, almost two million foreign tourists visited, four times the number that visited just a decade ago. Iceland's first COVID casualty was, perhaps not surprisingly, a vacationer. The man, whose name was not released, was Australian. He died on March 16th, shortly after arriving at a medical clinic in Húsavík, a small town on the northern coast known for whale-watching. His widow, who also tested positive, was ordered into isolation, a development that prompted an outpouring of sympathy from Icelanders. A woman named Rakel Jónsdóttir set up a Facebook group, With Love from Us, so that people could post messages to her; more than ten thousand people joined. "You may not see us, you may not know us, but we all think of you and have you in our hearts," Jónsdóttir wrote.

Icelanders, too, are big travellers: in 2018, more than eighty per cent of them vacationed abroad. I spoke to several people in Reykjavík who'd brought the virus home from overseas. One was Börkur Arnarson, an art dealer. I went to speak to him at his gallery, i8, which was closed to the public at the time. (Rule 4b: "Only those being interviewed should have direct interaction with the journalist.")

Arnarson, who represents, among others, the Danish-Icelandic artist Ólafur Eliasson, had been in New York, attending the Armory Show, at the beginning of March. After the show ended, he'd gone to a crowded party where finger food was served. "I'm not a news guy," he told me. "But I knew what was going on here in Iceland, and I knew what was going on in Europe. And I was struck by how New Yorkers were so confident. They didn't believe it was going to happen, or, if it was going to happen, somehow it was going to be O.K."

Arnarson started to feel crappy almost as soon as he got home. His daughter signed the family up for COVID tests that were being offered by deCODE;

BREAKING STRIDE

Nineteen seventy-eight, eighth grade: I'm five feet nine, a hundred and three pounds, and am often mistaken for a girl. Dave, a kid in my homeroom, same height, blond like me, is somehow fat and skinny at the same time. We both know "Let's Get Small," the Steve Martin album ("We're basically into the intellectual scene"), and, although we use it to transfix girls and keep cretins off balance, there's something else going on. In a romantic coupling, you turn inward, but friendships put you shoulder to shoulder to take on the world.

Ninth grade: We drink vodka at Martha Cedarholm's and throw up in the street. I sleep over at Dave's house, and it's comfortable. Our mothers like the same kind of pottery. My father, who's sometimes fun, is prone to rages and tantrums, like a child, while Dave's father, also fun, is a child psychiatrist. His parents casually slip into French at breakfast. His three older sisters have been known to sit on him and put his hair in doll curlers, but they've also taught him how to have a conversation.

Tenth grade: We're in high school now, still no girlfriends, so, for prom, we rent a limo with four other boys, dressed, by our fathers, in blazers and loafers. We're not cool, and it's almost beside the point that two of the guys in the limo are on acid, and one of them is a dwarf. For someone who feels anxious in a group, it's good to belong anywhere, with anyone, with Dave.

Eleventh grade: We have busboy jobs at Le Château, a big, corny restaurant run by a mean French family, in a stone mansion overlooking the Hudson Valley. The maître d' is not so sure about us; neither are the waiters, the captains, the wine guys, or Joseph, who hired us, or his lieutenant, Koos. Individually, we do a capable job of clearing, hauling trays and dish tubs, but as a team we're incompetent and despised. The grandmother catches us eating food off people's plates, we're blamed for breaking the ice machine, and the staff generates a growing list of insulting nicknames for us. But there's a wonderful smell of baguettes in paper bags, and on the drive home we own the road, dissecting the strangeness of a menacing world.

Twelfth grade: Mr. Henriquez's humor class. I memorize Steve Martin's "The Gospel Maniacs," a bit about a corrupt TV minister, and perform it, because religion is horseshit and comedy is a protest against small-mindedness. It doesn't go over with my classmates, and Dave is the only one laughing—for the entire four and a half minutes.

College: Even though ours is a bond based on achieving nothing, Dave gets into a very good college. I enroll at an underfunded state school, because it's the place that let me in. This isn't the first time that one of us breaks stride and inadvertently wounds the other, and it won't be the last. But the summer after freshman year we work together doing pool construction, and on the way to work he plays a tape of the radio show he d.j.'s, so that I can hear him



dedicate a song to me—"Cherry Tree," by 10,000 Maniacs—about a guy so dumb he can't read, and I feel honored.

There are months when I barely know what he's up to. I send him short stories, and he sends me TV scripts and tapes of his band. At some point, I realize I've been imitating his laugh since ninth grade, and make myself stop.

Our twenties: In Minneapolis, I meet his first serious girlfriend, and he doesn't confide sexual details to me, doesn't treat her like an obstacle to our friendship, and we all get along. That night, even though almost everything in our lives is terrible—I've been living on a waiter's salary for a decade, he hates writing ad copy—we sound so sure of ourselves and are so good at mirroring, listening to, and inspiring each other that we tape an hour of our drunken jabbering. That tape later lands in my mother's car, and she plays it until it breaks.

Our thirties: Dave moves to L.A. to try to get a TV show on the air. We settle into a cross-country thing. While we're crashing at my aunt's house in Montauk, he points out that, in a short story I recently published, a character named Dave is the obnoxious older brother. About this act of inexplicable hostility I say almost nothing, and we never mention it again.

Marriage, children, knee surgeries. Work triumphs and disasters. In New York City, I see ads on taxis for a TV show he's created, but after two seasons it's gone. Our friendship becomes superfluous, voluntary, sporadic. We tell each other the good things. The bad things we keep to ourselves. Eventually we don't even share the good news. Sometimes I wonder if the friendship is merely commemorative, but then I see him, we assess the changes, throw a Frisbee, talk all night, drink and smoke a few disgusting cigarettes, and he's the same, a ramblin' guy, an overgrown eighth grader. He visited in January and left behind a jar of peanut butter and a bottle of vermouth. That may be all I see of him for a while. ♦

when his came back positive, Arnarson went into isolation in a studio loaned to him by an artist friend. Every day, someone on the team of nurses and doctors phoned him. “They asked, ‘How are you doing? What are your symptoms? Are you getting all the help you need?’” he recalled. “And that was really amazing. It was so comforting, knowing that they were doing this.” He was given a number to call in case of an emergency: “I don’t think they were getting many calls, because they were so proactive.” While he was in isolation, his wife and his daughter, who’d originally tested negative for the virus, came down with it. They received the same treatment. None of them ended up going to the hospital or to a clinic.

Arnarson spent nearly six weeks on his own; with his family in isolation, he couldn’t go home once he’d recovered. During that time, along with the rest of Iceland, he watched the trio daily at 2 P.M. “The three of them—the policeman, the doctor, and the epidemiologist—they’re such heroes,” Arnarson said. “They were just calmly talking to the people, with just the facts and just the basics. There were no politics and no politicians in the way.”

At the height of the outbreak, Iceland’s government imposed a ban on gatherings of more than twenty people. It also closed high schools and universities. (Primary schools and day-care centers remained open, on a limited schedule.) The restrictions started to ease up in early May. By the time I arrived, the schools had reopened, the limit on gatherings had been raised to fifty, and people were again getting their hair cut. Across from where I was staying, the building that once housed Iceland’s state telephone company was being converted into a hotel. Every day, I woke to the clang of construction.

In the absence of tourists, though, many businesses in Reykjavík remained shuttered. One day, I took a walk down Laugavegur, the city’s equivalent of Fifth Avenue. Spúútník, a used-clothing store, was open, as was Swimwear & Bikini, a bathing-suit shop. But Óðinn, a store stocked with troll dolls and assorted other “Icelandic memorabilia,” was “closed until further notice.” So was Iceland Memories, a souvenir shop called

Thor, and another souvenir store called *idontspeakicelandic*. I stopped by a shop that was stuffed with puffin figurines and model Viking ships. (This was an admitted violation of Scenario 5; by this point, though, I’d been tested for the virus myself, and the result had come back negative.) It was empty except for two women working there.

“We have no tourists and we are a tourist shop,” one of them said, when I asked about business. She hunched her shoulders together: “Normally, we are so crowded you cannot walk.”

Having effectively eliminated the virus—the week I was there, only one new case was confirmed—Iceland now finds itself in a position at once enviable and awkward. Obviously, the fewer people who enter the country, the less likely a new outbreak. But no visitors means empty hotels, unsold trolls, and thousands upon thousands of lost jobs. (Icelandair may require a government bailout; well before the virus hit, it was losing money.)

Even as I was struggling to abide by the rules of my modified quarantine, longingly eying the coffee bars and the public rest rooms, Icelandic authorities were considering how to reopen the border. On May 12th, the country’s Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, announced a plan to let visitors into the country by mid-June. Under the plan, foreigners arriving at Keflavík would be presented with three options. They could show a certificate confirming a recent negative COVID-19 test, be screened for the virus, or go into quarantine. Who would perform the screening, and how this would all work, was left unspecified.

The day after Jakobsdóttir’s announcement, I was talking to Kári Stefánsson about it when he asked, “Do you want to talk to the Prime Minister?” I said sure. He called her press secretary, who didn’t answer, so he dialed Jakobsdóttir directly. She picked up.

Jakobsdóttir, who is forty-four, is a member of the Left-Green Movement. She became Prime Minister in 2017, at a particularly turbulent moment in Icelandic politics: two governments had collapsed in quick succession, one owing to a scandal involving a sex offender, the other to a scandal involving offshore assets. She works out of a handsome building known as the Cabinet House,

which was erected in the late eighteenth century as a prison.

As I was ushered into her office, she told me that she had agreed to see me mostly because it was easier than arguing with Stefánsson. I asked her why she thought Iceland had done so much better at dealing with COVID-19 than so many other countries. “We were following the news from China very closely,” she said. “So we started our preparations long before the first case tested positive here in Iceland. And it was very clear from the beginning that this was something that should be led by experts—by scientific and medical experts.” She went on, “And the experts, they were very humble. They were saying, ‘We really don’t know everything about this virus.’ And I think one of the strengths of the process is that we just said, ‘Well, we don’t know what is going to happen next.’”

Jakobsdóttir praised the work of the contact-tracing team, which had compelled one of her three sons to go into quarantine. (Her husband took him to a summer house for two weeks.) I asked about the plan to reopen the border. She noted that all the countries in Europe were struggling with this issue.

“We think we are taking a really cautious step, by saying we are going to start this experiment, where people can choose between a test or quarantine,” she said. “If it works well, it might become the arrangement, at least for the next few months. It won’t save the tourism sector in Iceland this year. We are very much aware of that. But we need somehow to insure that people can come and leave the island, and we need to do it without putting too much pressure on the health-care system. So it’s a delicate balance.”

That evening, the weather was clear and cool—by New York standards, too cool to eat outside, by Reykjavík standards balmy. The outdoor cafés were crowded. Restaurants had been asked to arrange their tables to keep groups two metres apart, but some diners, I noticed, had pushed the tables closer together. Everyone was talking and laughing, masklessly. The scene was completely ordinary, which is to say now exotic—just people meeting up with friends for dinner. For a traveller these days, this might be an even better draw, I thought, than glaciers or whale-watching. ♦

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THE MAKING OF AMERICANS

The genre-defying life and work of Maxine Hong Kingston.

BY HUA HSU

In 1973, Maxine Hong Kingston and her husband, Earll, took a vacation to Lānaʻi, a small Hawaiian island about eighty miles southeast of Oʻahu, where they lived. There was little to do. Lānaʻi was essentially a pineapple plantation, and they were awakened each morning at five, when a siren called workers to the fields. The Kingstons stayed at the only hotel on the island, which was largely empty. The bulb for the movie projector was broken. The bowling alley was closed for repairs. Maxine turned her desk to face the wall, and began writing.

The Kingstons had moved to Oʻahu after getting burned out on life in Berkeley, where they met as college students, in the early sixties. They got caught up in the era's celebration of free expression and consciousness-seeking excess, and the movements for civil rights and peace. But by 1967 they had taken one too many friends to the hospital after bad acid trips. Some people left for communes, never to return. Every peace demonstration seemed to end in a riot. The period surrounding the Vietnam War, Kingston recalled, felt like one during which "good and evil became distinct," yin and yang going separate ways.

They had a son, Joseph, and set off for Japan, which Earll remembered fondly from his days as a serviceman. But, during a stopover in Hawaii, they saw a "For Rent" sign above a grocery store in Kahaluʻu, along Kāneʻohe Bay, and decided to stay. They tried to live as they had in Berkeley, in an improvisational community, their doors open to anyone. But things started to go missing, and it was unclear whether their neighbors also believed in communal sharing or if they were taking advantage of the Kingstons. Kahaluʻu is on the island's windward side, and Maxine, like many Chinese people who believe that wind disturbs one's qi, or life-force equilibrium, found the constant

gusts distressing. She couldn't think. More pressing, they hadn't realized that across the beautiful turquoise bay was a military base. They had left California to escape the war. But each day they looked out the window and saw huge cargo planes delivering young Americans, like Maxine's brothers, to fight in Vietnam.

By the time they went to Lānaʻi, Maxine and Earll were looking to overcome the sense of drift that had lingered after the sixties. Earll studied acting at the University of Hawaiʻi, and Maxine taught high school, writing in her spare time. There was only one other guest at the hotel: Frederick Exley, whose debut novel, "A Fan's Notes," had been a finalist for the National Book Awards in 1969. Maxine would see him at the bar each morning, though they never spoke. This is a place where writers come, she thought. This is where people find inspiration. She went back to her room and continued writing down stories and memories.

"The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts," the resulting book, was published three years later, when Kingston was thirty-five. In the seventies, publishers had begun responding to America's social realities by offering challenging, textured depictions of what it meant to be part of a minority. "The Woman Warrior," which was marketed as a memoir based on Kingston's upbringing, seemed to adhere to typical preconceptions—the cascading effects of patriarchal traditions, the stern and unaffectionate immigrant parents, the children caught between duty and dreaming. But, unlike most ethnic coming-of-age tales of the time, it seeded doubt about its own authenticity. The characters tell one another stories drawn from Chinese lore and Chinatown gossip, imagining alternative time lines. The book is complex and captivating, a constant toggling between the mundane grit of the family's laundry business and

epic, surreal dreamscapes. By the end, you don't know which, if any, of these stories are true, or whether they constitute a reliable depiction of Chinese-American life.

"The Woman Warrior" changed American culture. For those who understood where Kingston was coming from, it was encouragement that they could tell stories, too. For those who didn't, "The Woman Warrior" became the definitive telling of the Asian immigrant experience, at a time when there weren't many to choose from. Younger Asian-American writers would later complain of receiving "a generic Maxine Hong Kingston rejection letter" from publishers who regarded "The Woman Warrior" as monolithic.

"The Woman Warrior" won the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction, and in the eighties and nineties Kingston was one of the most frequently taught living authors at American colleges and universities. "As an account of growing up female and Chinese-American in California, in a laundry of course, it is anti-nostalgic. It burns the fat right out of the mind," John Leonard wrote, in the *Times*. "As a dream—of the 'female avenger'—it is dizzying, elemental, a poem turned into a sword." When Barack Obama presented Kingston with the National Medal of Arts, in 2014, he said that, while writing his first book, "Dreams from My Father," he had turned to "The Woman Warrior" for inspiration.

Kingston and Earll used the proceeds from the novel to put down a deposit on a house in the Mānoa Valley, a lush, quiet neighborhood just east of downtown Honolulu. They lived there until 1984, when they returned to California.

Earlier this year, Kingston, who is seventy-nine, was back in Honolulu. Joseph, a musician, now lives in their old house with his wife, Saki, and their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Hana



"The Woman Warrior" changed literary culture. But Kingston plans to release her final work only after she dies.

Měi. Saki was due to give birth to their second child in mid-February, and Maxine and Earll had come to help out.

I walked up a path lined with modest, well-kept homes bearing historic-registry plaques. The Kingston house stood out. A covered, two-story deck seemed to grow haphazardly out of the house's side, and it was decorated with a Bob Marley shirt and a sign for a local council meeting about invasive pigs. A wetsuit and a swing hung from the ceiling, while a small statue of a cat stood guard. Kingston called my name and waved from a second-floor window. I wasn't sure where the front door was.

She met me on the deck, holding a manila envelope, which held manuscript pages. Kingston hasn't published anything substantial since her 2011 memoir, *"I Love a Broad Margin to My Life."* Late last year, I asked if she was working on anything new. She laughed. I had a vision, she told me over the phone, that my last book would be a posthumous one.

Maxine Hong was born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, to Tom Hong and Chew Ying Lan. Her father had left for America in the twenties in search of work. But the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a xenopho-

bic response to the nineteenth-century influx of Chinese workers, was still law, and Tom Hong couldn't enter America legally. He tried to sneak in from Cuba twice before finally succeeding, in 1927.

Hong had been a scholar in his home village of Sun Woi, near Canton, but in America he could find only menial jobs—washing windows, doing laundry. Like many Chinese-American men, he sent money home to his family, promising to bring them over when the opportunity arose.

Hong was a skilled gambler. One night, in Manhattan's Chinatown, he won six hundred dollars from a man also named Hong. The other Hong was unable to pay the debt. Instead, he agreed to give Maxine's father his visa papers, which Hong used to bring Chew to America, in 1939. Hong and Chew headed west, to Stockton, a busy port town in central California.

During their fifteen years apart, Chew had studied Western medicine and become a doctor. But in Stockton she was just another immigrant. They ran a laundry and a gambling house. Chew foraged for herbs and vegetables in empty lots. Maxine was named for a blond woman who frequented her father's predominantly Chinese gambling tables. ("She was probably such a floozy,"

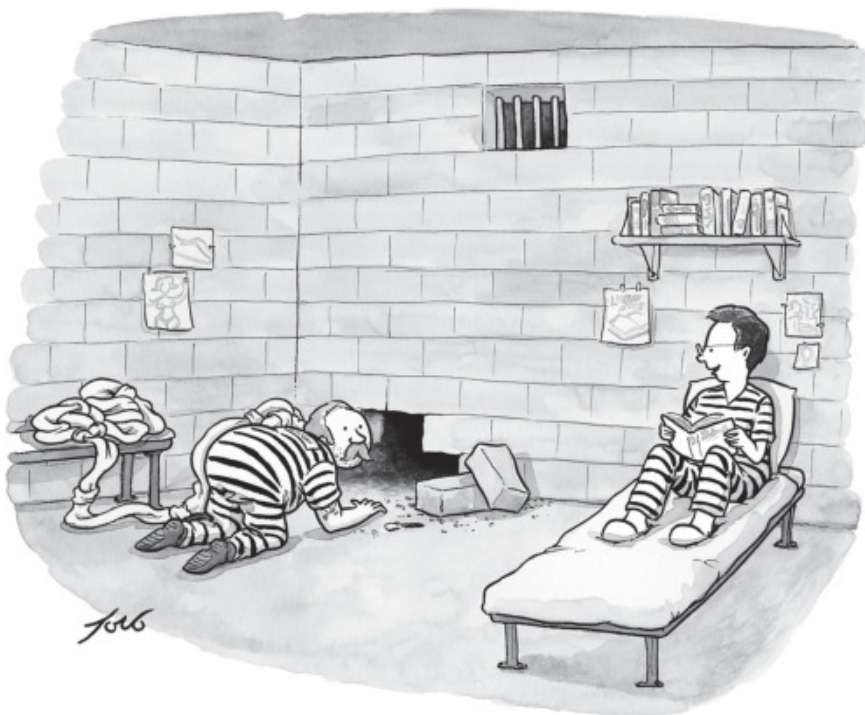
Kingston told me. "Who hangs out at a Chinese gambling parlor? What white woman would do this?")

Kingston was a quiet child, and she didn't learn to speak English until she was five. She says that her I.Q. was once recorded as zero. When asked to paint a picture for class, she produced a sheet of paper that was completely black. (It was meant to be a depiction of curtains on a stage before a show.) Her earliest memories are of the Second World War—cousins in uniform going overseas, illustrations in Chinese newspapers portraying torture by the Japanese. She became fascinated with warfare and soldiers. Her mother narrated the history of China as one long string of conquest and conflict. "We were always losers. We were always on the run," Kingston told me.

When she was a teen-ager, she wrote an essay about being American that was published in the magazine *American Girl*. But it was hard to see a path as a writer. She remembers reading Louisa May Alcott's "Eight Cousins," in which a white character marries "a highly satisfactory Chinaman" named Fun See. This struck Kingston as a meaningful, vaguely sympathetic gesture. But Fun See was still exotically "other," with his long fingernails and queue, his yellow skin and peculiar manners. That's me, Kingston thought. She realized that she would never be a March sister. "I felt like I was popped out of her writing," she said. "Out of American literature."

Hong went to Berkeley in 1958, to study engineering, but she fell in with the emerging counterculture and became an English major instead. She had grown up in a traditional household beholden to Confucian values. When she began reading Beat poetry, she was finally able to "put a word" to her maelstrom of feelings. "I'm always struggling with being in the present, always resolving to be here, be here, be here," she said. She met Earll, a fellow English major who was a couple of years older. They married in 1962, the year she graduated. The next year, she gave birth to Joseph.

As Maxine and I left the house for a nearby café, she pointed to the second-floor window—the office where she wrote much of her second book, "China



"No, thanks. Reading is my escape."

Men,” a collection of stories about the lives of Chinese immigrant men. Hawaii is a good place to write about Asians, she said, because there are so many of us here. And the notion of the “talk story,” the improvisational, oral tradition that drives “The Woman Warrior,” is central to Hawaiian culture. (“Talk story” is also the translation of the Chinese expression for “storytelling.”)

We cut across a neighbor’s driveway, following a set of stone steps shaded by large trees. She was wearing leggings and a loose-fitting striped shirt, clutching a bag with berries on it and the manila envelope. Her hair is white and frayed, like a penumbra.

At the café, she told me about a dream she had the night before. I was coming to interview her, but I was Tyra Banks, the host of “America’s Next Top Model.” I suggested that the dream might have to do with questions of changing fashions, or enduring relevance. Her work has paved many paths for later generations, from the unvarnished immigrant coming-of-age stories of Amy Tan to the knowing way in which writers like Viet Thanh Nguyen and Junot Díaz have complicated that experience. But Kingston has kept a low profile in the past decade, and her books are no longer as pervasive in trendy bookstores or on college syllabuses.

When Maxine and Earll realized that they had somehow moved closer to the Vietnam War, they began working at a local church, which provided sanctuary to soldiers who had gone AWOL. “They built the most beautiful community,” she remembered. “The extremes were happening all the time.” There was “pure hell,” and then the attempt to overcome it by imagining new ways of living together. “The times were so desperate that people resorted to magic,” she said, recalling moments, like the yuppies’ attempt to levitate the Pentagon, in 1967, when young people tried to will peace and utopia into being. But the church was raided, and parents tried tricking their children into returning to the base. Other times, soldiers would get tired of life as deserters and ask to be driven back. Initially, Kingston blurred the line between nonfiction and fiction, in part

to maintain a kind of plausible deniability, should she ever run into troubles of her own while writing about family secrets or her antiwar work.

She titled her first book “Gold Mountain Stories,” and quickly sold it to Knopf. Charles Elliott, her editor, told me in an e-mail, “What was clear to me from the start was the distinctive hard authority of her writing.” He made only two major suggestions: renaming the book “The Woman Warrior,” to emphasize that it was a single work and not a collection, and categorizing it as nonfiction, because it “was essentially a kind of memoir, and far more interesting as such.” Bookstores labelled it fiction, nonfiction, sociology, anthropology, biography, women’s literature, Chinese literature, and Asian literature. In a letter to the Chinese-American writer Shawn Wong, in 1976, Kingston wrote, “This confusion really makes me feel good.”

The book opens with a warning from mother to daughter: “You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you.” To read “The Woman Warrior” is to conspire with its narrator, who is never named but is referred to by other characters as Little Dog. Her mother tells her the story of her aunt, the “no-name woman,” who killed herself and her newborn child by jumping into the family well. Her village had turned against her, knowing that the child’s father could not be her husband, since he had left for America. It’s a mother’s warning to her daughter as she approaches puberty. But Little Dog studies what her mother is doing, telling a story, denying its central protagonist the dignity of a name, and recognizes a kind of power. She begins retelling the story herself, imagining different versions of it. Maybe her aunt was a victim of rape. Or maybe she was in control of her own passion. The truth of it matters less than the apparatus itself—why she is forgotten, and how she can be remembered.

When I first read Kingston, in my late teens, I was drawn to the familiarity of it all: the immigrant enclave where anyone non-Chinese was called a “ghost,” the cautionary folktales with

the moral punch lines often lost in translation, the misunderstood silences. But what stayed with me was the realization that her characters weren’t merely trying to survive in this harsh, difficult world but to remake it through their fantasies and dreams. These characters emerged from their realist settings aching for impossible things, like peace, or world-changing art, or having all the friends in your lifetime in the same room at once, or Chinese parents and their American kids simply seeing eye to eye. At the time, it felt impossible to me that such grandiose, almost flamboyantly hopeful visions could emanate from characters who otherwise seemed so relatable to me. Her books open in

darkness and trauma. But they always suggest the possibility of greater light.

Kingston has a hoarse, gently animated way of speaking, retaining the measured cadence of her days as a teacher. (She has referred to her voice as that of a “pressed duck.”) Often, her unassuming, offbeat nature leads people to underestimate her. John Leonard wrote that the author remained a cipher: “Who is Maxine Hong Kingston? Nobody at Knopf seems to know. They have never laid eyes on her.” After Leonard’s glowing review, someone at Knopf explained to her that the *Times* was a very important newspaper. Elliott didn’t meet Kingston until she came to New York to accept the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction. “I was mostly struck by how small she was,” he recalled. “When she stood behind the podium, she disappeared, and had to stand beside it.”

“The Woman Warrior” conveys the sense of being told a story, and recognizing it as such. To many readers, the dark, psychological tales offer an authentic account of what it was like to grow up in an immigrant household. But Kingston plants seeds of doubt that this experience can be generalized. “Chinese Americans,” she writes, “when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, to insanity, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from



what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?"

By the end of "The Woman Warrior," Little Dog has taken the scraps of her family's story, passed down from her mother, and added to it: "The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." The poet and novelist Ocean Vuong told me that his life was both "mirrored and altered" by "The Woman Warrior": "I found Maxine's audacious centering of Chinese-American life, its idiosyncrasies, political inflections, its refusal to sugarcoat or cast the façade of an elegant surface over immigrants, startlingly life affirming." In his novel "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," from 2019, the narrator is named Little Dog, partly as a nod to Kingston.

"The Woman Warrior" initially created divisions among Asian-American writers and readers. In 1974, Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong had published a galvanizing collection titled "Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers." They shared Kingston's interest in the psychological entanglements of being Asian-American. Chin also studied literature at Berkeley, though he and Kingston never met. But the "Aiiieeeee!" authors were invested in a kind of brash realism that clashed with the hallucinatory play of "The Woman Warrior." After Chin read the book, he wrote Kingston the first of many letters accusing her of purposely misrepresenting Chinese culture. Other Asian-American male critics dismissed her as someone who aired the community's dirty laundry and capitalized on the trendiness of American feminism. The rift between Chin and Kingston continues to this day, standing in for different versions of authenticity—whether the concept is something stirring and immovable or is more contingent and intimate, perhaps even ugly. Chin once wrote her a heated letter saying that the only reason for meeting would be for "a public fight, but I'm not anxious for that."

Kingston pulled out a sheet of handwritten notes detailing various translations of my Chinese name. (Joseph and Saki have named their son Malu Hua, which shares a Chinese character with mine.) The café had closed, and we

sat outside, on the patio. The only sounds were from chirping birds, clucking chickens, the occasional snort of a distant pig. She pointed out a shack a few yards away, where Robert Louis Stevenson had once worked. When she moved to Mānoa, she took comfort in knowing that a fellow-writer had found inspiration looking out at this valley.

"I write something that I wish for," Kingston said. "In 'China Men,' there's the story of my grandfather who traded

his son for a daughter. Actually, that happened, and the son was my father. My grandmother got really mad and they traded back." In the book, this man seems kind, even charming, in his obsession with bringing some feminine energy into their home. "The way I wrote it was to show how he loved her, how he just wanted to hold her, and he wanted to sing to her. But I wrote it to give myself a grandfather who would love me as a girl." Growing up, she said, she'd

PASTORAL

I was unincorporated
I was without a body
I was lots
Not lots yet parcels

I was ground
Where the pipes will go
I was shrubs I was
Brush and the space

Between shacks I lacked
Governance I was
Lean-tos I was dens
In the earth and

Roots of the weak
Sweetgum I was pear
And turtle sunning
I was lungs un-

Breathing I was the site
On the horse's neck
Where bats came
Nightly to feed I was

The blood coagulating
Into morning I was
Waiting for full dark
Again I was waiting

For the wound
To reopen I was led
To a tree a weak
Tree strung with nets

I was the bat hoping
To be caught I
Couldn't heal myself
Fast enough

—Melissa Ginsburg

always heard people in her family say that they didn't want girls. "So I wrote it for myself."

When she completed "China Men," she and Earll flew to New York. After reading the manuscript, Elliott told her that she had failed. "You don't understand men," she remembers him saying. "They're lonelier than this."

Devastated, Kingston got on a bus uptown to her friend Lilah Kan's apartment, where she and Earll were staying. "I just felt terrible," she said. She was met by Kan, Earll, and about ten friends, who greeted her with champagne and pot to celebrate her big meeting. They went ahead with the party, as she retreated into the corner with her Selectric typewriter and wrote a scene based on her father's time in New York. So much of the immigrant story is joyless hard work. America is so free that you are even free to work through the holidays, Kingston wrote. She wanted to give the immigrant workers a day off. Her father enjoys a night out on the town, ending up at a tearoom, where Chinese men could buy dances with white women. Her father fox-trots with as many blondes as he desires, then returns home alone, wondering if his wife will ever make it to America.

"I give the narrative to all these men, but there's still this voice that's me," Kingston told me. "My father is dancing with this blonde—I described the cascading blond hair, the beautiful blue eyes. And I hope that the reader understands that I am very lonely, 'cause that's the opposite description of me. That's not me. Maybe indirectly you can feel my being left out of this scene." Usually a slow and methodical writer, she finished the scene in an hour. Then she read what she had written aloud to the party. "Is this lonely enough?" she asked.

"China Men" won the 1981 National Book Award for nonfiction. Kingston attended the award ceremony in New York wearing leis from her Hawaiian friends. She donated her papers to Berkeley's Bancroft Library. At the ceremony, Kingston pulled her father aside and showed him a display featuring some of his notes written as poetry in the margins of her books. "My writing, my writing!" her father, a shy man, cried out.

In 1984, Kingston visited China for

the first time, touring the country as part of a delegation of writers sponsored by U.C.L.A. and the Chinese Writers Association. She spent time with Leslie Marmon Silko and Toni Morrison. In an e-mail, Silko recalled the three of them visiting an old storytellers' hall in southern China. "The Woman Warrior," she wrote, "is storytelling at its highest level, where webs of narrative conjure the ghosts that stand up and reveal all."

One day, they were on a boat going down the Li River, and Morrison saw a young woman doing laundry along the shore. Morrison waved to her and said, "Goodbye, Maxine." She gets it, Kingston thought. If immigration hadn't brought her to the U.S., "that could have been me," she said. "Were you my possible other life?"

In the summer of 1991, Kingston's father died. She and Earll had moved to Oakland; she was teaching at Berkeley and writing her next book. That fall, she was driving home from Stockton, where her family had gathered to mark the hundredth day since her father's death, when she heard on the radio that a fire was sweeping through the East Bay. She began driving faster, hoping to reach their house in the hills of northern Oakland before the fire did. Firefighters had set up barricades along the main roads, so she sneaked up the side of the hill on foot. Her house had burned to the ground. She saw the pages of the manuscript for her next book, but they disintegrated into ashes when she touched them. It was her only copy.

Kingston had been a hundred and fifty-six "excellent" pages into the sequel to "Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book" (1989), a novel about a brooding dreamer named Wittman Ah Sing, who aspires to write a play that will feature everyone he has ever met, and in the process end the Vietnam War. Ecstatic and overwhelming, it occasionally reads like a trippy handbook for how to be a good friend.

As we sat on the patio, Kingston said, "I remember standing there in the fire and facing loss. And one of the feelings that really strongly came to me was this community is gone and, you know, people kept talking about rebuilding, and there's no rebuilding. The community

that was here, which was formed at random, it's gone."

Kingston realized that her life as a writer had begun to exacerbate a sense of loneliness. She couldn't reconstruct the missing book, nor did she want to. After the fire, she began asking people at her readings to bring things for her—talismans, other objects, maybe even their own stories. She wanted to write with other people.

At a reading at San José State University, she invited a man named Bob Golling to a writing workshop that she was organizing at Berkeley for veterans. Golling had been trying for years to write a story about an experience he had before going to Vietnam. In June, 1993, he went to the first meeting, and listened to everyone else's "hair-raising" stories from the war. There was a brief writing exercise, but he couldn't produce anything. Afterward, he said, he drove home, feeling that he had been "singularly unsuccessful," and thought that he would never go back. But Kingston arranged another meeting the following month, and Golling kept writing. The workshop for veterans has continued ever since, and Golling now helps plan and organize the meetings. Eventually, he published his story, about his job escorting the bodies of deceased servicemen, in "Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace," a collection edited by Kingston, from 2006.

The workshop meets quarterly, and the members were supposed to assemble at a senior citizens' center, in Santa Rosa, on March 21st. But the group decided to cancel, in advance of California's shelter-in-place orders, for fear of infecting the facility's elderly tenants. The participants resolved to keep the date free and write by themselves. I talked to Golling that morning. He was at his home, near Auburn, California, coordinating the "virtual wordshop" by e-mail.

"I always tell people, 'We're not a therapy group,'" he said. "But therapy happens." He remembers everything about the first meeting at Berkeley—where he parked his car, whom he sat next to, Kingston's "warm, sensible" clothes and gently assertive manner. He describes her as a "big sister." When someone talked for too long, she would bang together two sticks, to comedic effect. "She always

goes, ‘Pay attention to what people are saying, not just with your ears but with your heart,’” he said. When you do that, “we can share those few minutes of reading and writing together and become another person. It’s magic.”

In the nineties, Kingston would bring some of the veterans to her public events and readings, inviting them to share their work alongside her. They felt that they were ambushing audiences who had come to hear Kingston. But their hesitation quickly disappeared. “She always greets us with a hug that says we are here together,” Golling told me.

The anxieties of the sixties were returning. In 2003, as the United States prepared to invade Iraq, Kingston was arrested during a protest in front of the White House. Her writing charted new extremes—she briefly wrote poetry that was searching and jagged, skeptical of fiction’s capacity for imagining a way out of the world’s problems. She no longer wrote about the “Chinese past,” she said. Now she was focussed on the “American present.” Just as long-lost friends from the sixties occasionally showed up on her doorstep, older characters started resurfacing in her work. Fa Mu Lan, from “The Woman Warrior,” returns at the end of her memoir, and Wittman and Taña, the couple at the center of “Tripmaster Monkey,” show up in “The Fifth Book of Peace,” from 2003.

The last chapter of “The Fifth Book of Peace” recounts a version of her work with veterans. It feels like a thematic riff on “The Woman Warrior”; the beginning was hers, and the ending is theirs, together. Before publication, she gave a draft to Golling to read. “I had no edits,” he told me coolly, then laughed.

In the book, Kingston describes seeing Golling at that initial meeting, in June, 1993, the first veteran to arrive: his fading sailor’s tattoo, his description of himself “not as a writer but as a househusband, father of six sons.” Kingston wrote, “He asks large questions, and has come here for answers.”

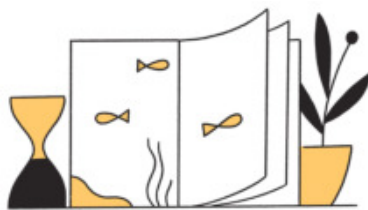
One morning, Maxine, Earll, and Joseph took Hana Mēi to the Honolulu Zoo, which sits at the far eastern end of Waikiki’s tourist district. It was early, and the sounds of gibbons, hooting and snorting, filled the air. I chatted with Earll about the kitschy, old

Waikiki hotels where Joseph occasionally gigs. I was standing next to Kingston, but she didn’t notice me until she had carefully nestled her granddaughter back in her stroller.

When I spoke to Kingston before going to Honolulu, she’d mentioned that being a grandmother had sapped her of the intense drive to work. When you’re younger, she told me, you have a vague desire to do something great. When she was bringing up Joseph, she would give him a bag of marshmallows and disappear to write for twenty minutes. “My son said we never had food in the house, only alfalfa sprouts,” she told a reporter in 2011. “I suppose it looked like we were spending a lot of time together, as he was here and I was working at home. But I was emotionally not there. From the beginning of my life, I have always been making up fantasies and stories and characters of the other world. People around me were not as interesting.”

Now she could be with her grandchildren and do absolutely nothing. Writers, she told me, are interested in understanding the past, or projecting into the future. None of this makes sense to a child. “They are in the present, and then we are in the present with them,” she said.

Later that day, I again met Kingston on the deck of her family’s home. She appeared from inside the house with two glasses of iced tea and her manila envelope. From the deck, you could see



past the valley toward Waikiki. Some young men installing a solar panel across the street chatted and listened to Travis Scott at a respectable volume. Kingston opened the envelope and showed me some of her novel, which she has tentatively titled “Posthumously, Maxine.” It was formatted in dense blocks of text, like a script. “I know I could die at any moment,” she said. “So I was writing a work which could end at any moment. And it’ll be O.K., because I’m

not working for this heading toward a climax and then a reconciliation and ending.”

Joseph came out to give me a CD of his latest album, “Love Doll,” before leaving for work. “There’s something in there to offend anybody and everybody,” he said, chuckling. Kingston pointed to a laid-back, ukulele-driven pop tune called “Bonging Along,” which she had posted on her Facebook page. “Robert Pinsky said that he loved the recitative from that song,” she told me proudly. “The poet laureate of the United States!”

The idea for publishing a novel posthumously came to Kingston after learning of Mark Twain’s autobiography, which wasn’t released in uncensored form until 2010, a hundred years after his death. If Kingston knew that she wouldn’t have to answer for her work, perhaps she would be able to write more freely. At first, her notes represented an attempt to capture each day’s “intensity,” she said. In time, she realized that she had written about twelve hundred single-spaced pages. She continued writing. She told her agent, Sandy Dijkstra, that the book would remain unpublished for a hundred years. “I was stunned, shocked, and more,” Dijkstra said in an e-mail, “and told her that I could not promise to be a living and functioning agent a century from now.” Kingston has not shown her any of it. “Maybe you can persuade Maxine to show it to us MUCH SOONER,” she said. “Magical thinking works on the page, but not so well in real life.”

Kingston leaned across the table and asked me if I remembered that, at the beginning of “Tripmaster Monkey,” Wittman imagines leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge. She pointed out that, at the end of “Broad Margin,” Fa Mu Lan returns and takes her own life. In that book, Kingston goes on to list the people in her life who have died in the past four years. “Each one who dies, I want to go with you,” she writes, before wondering, on the next page, “Why continue to live?”

“In all of these books, I’m preparing the reader and myself to deal with suicide,” she said. “You know how when you go to the doctor you fill out a questionnaire and they ask you, ‘Do you have any suicidal thoughts?’” she asked. “I always put ‘No.’ But the truth is that I

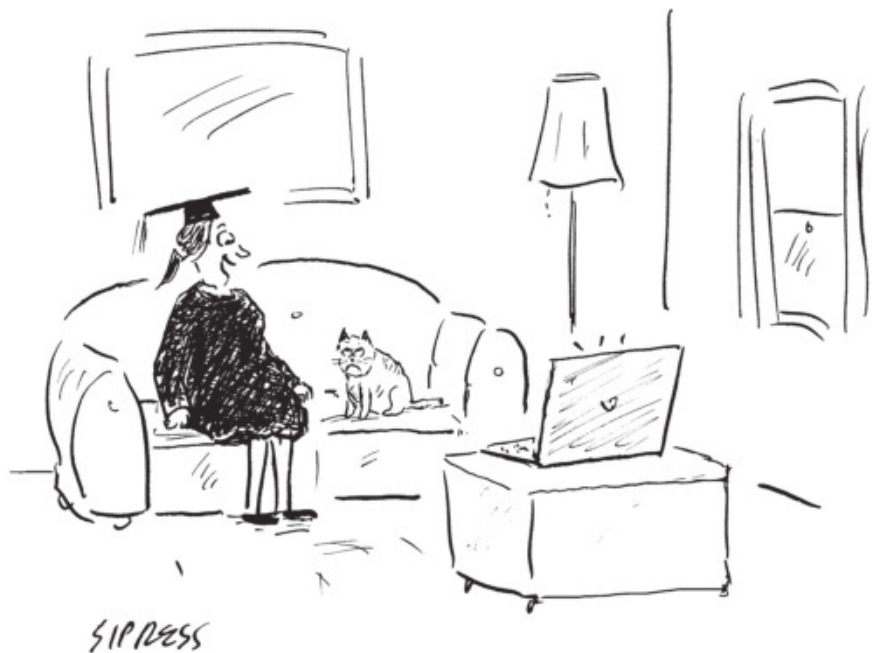
have suicidal thoughts every day and I don't tell anybody. I've been through therapy and everything, but I don't even tell my therapist. I don't want to upset them. Isn't that a dumb reason?"

When she was a child, she remembers asking God to strike her dead, just to see if it would happen. "I pretty much know that I'm not going to do it," she said. But the writer's privilege is to explore where this darkness comes from. "I don't want my family to think that I think about killing myself every day, you know?" she said. "And, so, this word 'posthumously,' I can delve into it and see what's going on."

She reached into the manila envelope and took out a few sheets of paper. She put on a pair of glasses and read a vignette in which Maxine and Earll are flying home, worried that they will miss their connecting flight. They try to enlist the help of various flight attendants, but nobody seems to care. They make their way to the front of the plane, hugging their bags to their bodies as the door opens and they run to the next gate. Maxine sees a young Asian-American soldier, who smiles at her, and then another. She wonders if they will help their "aunty" and offer to carry her luggage. But they don't. Earll eventually reaches the gate and blocks the door so that the plane can't leave until Maxine arrives.

When Kingston speaks, her sentences rise and fall, as if she were trying to tame her thoughts. But when she reads there's a cool theatricality, an assertiveness that snaps everything into place. After she finished the scene, she removed her glasses and smiled. "I'm being self-indulgent," she explained. The skies had turned gray and it began to pour, the water draining into a small tiled fountain that Joseph had built along the edge of the house. I assumed that the Asian-American soldier and the flight attendants held some deeper meaning. She demurred. "There's nothing cosmic about trying to get the plane," she said. "It's just the present." A way of expelling passing feelings of pettiness.

When the scholar Edward Said was nearing the end of his life, he explored the idea of "late style," how artists' work accommodates the awareness that their days are numbered. He



"Thank you so much for coming."

describes them engaging in works full of formal complexity, experimentation, and contradiction, all of it meant as some kind of final statement of what art can be. What Kingston read to me—the story about the plane, another about going to Chinatown with Earll to buy a winter melon for the New Year's dinner—had little to do with the status of the novel or the possibilities of art. She had rendered mundane moments in plain language. The Maxine in these pieces, she explained, is her "actual self"—how she hopes that Hana Měi will remember her. (The book will be available to her grandchildren during their lifetime.) I remarked on how different these vignettes were from her work from the seventies and eighties; they were bereft of drama or utopian longing, of attempts to "make my mind large, as the universe is large, so there is room for contradictions," as she once wrote. The "best life," she replied, is "where there isn't great drama happening."

I thought about what Kingston had said about the veterans' group: A writer is always alone, even when she is collaborating, or giving herself over. These sketches of her life weren't for anyone but her. They were not, as the mother in "The Woman Warrior" said, "a story

to grow on," outlining who we might be in the future. "It's really enjoying my present life," she said. "I am really enjoying going to buy that winter melon. I'm deeply into it." They are moments that allow her to anchor in the serene here and now of everyday life. "I'm so sane in my work. That's why it's fiction."

The rain had stopped, and it was time for me to leave. We planned to meet in the East Bay in late March. Maybe we could go for a walk at Berkeley, or go see "Mulan," the latest Disney adaptation of the Chinese folktale that she refashioned for "The Woman Warrior."

It was the week before everyone learned about social distancing. It had become harder to find baby formula and hand sanitizer on the island, though hoarding still seemed like a plot point in a dystopian novel. Downstairs, Earll was sitting at a table reading the newspaper. He had turned eighty-three a few days earlier, and I wished him a belated happy birthday. We chatted about Super Tuesday. Saki quietly shushed the newborn. I shook Earll's hand, and Maxine jumped between us. "We're not supposed to touch!" she exclaimed, laughing, and pulled the door shut. ♦



CONFESSIONS OF A SHINAGAWA MONKEY

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

I met that elderly monkey in a small Japanese-style inn in a hot-springs town in Gunma Prefecture, some five years ago. It was a rustic or, more precisely, decrepit inn, barely hanging on, where I just happened to spend a night.

I was travelling around, wherever the spirit led me, and it was already past 7 P.M. when I arrived at the hot-springs town and got off the train. Autumn was nearly over, the sun had long since set, and the place was enveloped in that special navy-blue darkness particular to mountainous areas. A cold, biting wind blew down from the peaks, sending fist-size leaves rustling along the street.

I walked through the center of the town in search of a place to stay, but none of the decent inns would take in guests after the dinner hour had passed. I stopped at five or six places, but they all turned me down flat. Finally, in a deserted area outside town, I came across an inn that would take me. It was a desolate-looking, ramshackle place, almost a flophouse. It had seen a lot of years go by, but it had none of the quaint appeal you might expect in an old inn. Fittings here and there were ever so slightly slanted, as if slapdash repairs had been made that didn't mesh with the rest of the place. I doubted it would make it through the next earthquake, and I could only hope that no temblor would hit while I was there.

The inn didn't serve dinner, but breakfast was included, and the rate for one night was incredibly cheap. Inside the entrance was a plain reception desk, behind which sat a completely hairless old man—devoid of even eyebrows—who took my payment for one night in advance. The lack of eyebrows made the old man's largish eyes seem to glisten bizarrely, glaringly. On a cushion on the floor beside him, a big brown cat, equally ancient, was sacked out, sound asleep. Something must have been wrong with

its nose, for it snored louder than any cat I'd ever heard. Occasionally the rhythm of its snores fitfully missed a beat. Everything in this inn seemed to be old and falling apart.

The room I was shown to was cramped, like the storage area where one keeps futon bedding; the ceiling light was dim, and the flooring under the tatami creaked ominously with each step. But it was too late to be particular. I told myself I should be happy to have a roof over my head and a futon to sleep on.

I put my one piece of luggage, a large shoulder bag, down on the floor and set off back to town. (This wasn't exactly the type of room I wanted to lounge around in.) I went into a nearby soba-noodle shop and had a simple dinner. It was that or nothing, since there were no other restaurants open. I had a beer, some bar snacks, and some hot soba. The soba was mediocre, the soup lukewarm, but, again, I wasn't about to complain. It beat going to bed on an empty stomach. After I left the soba shop, I thought I'd buy some snacks and a small bottle of whiskey, but I couldn't find a convenience store. It was after eight, and the only places open were the shooting-gallery game centers typically found in hot-springs towns. So I hoofed it back to the inn, changed into a yukata robe, and went downstairs to take a bath.

Compared with the shabby building and facilities, the hot-springs bath at the inn was surprisingly wonderful. The steaming water was a thick green color, not diluted, the sulfur odor more pungent than anything I'd ever experienced, and I soaked there, warming myself to the bone. There were no other bathers (I had no idea if there were even any other guests at the inn), and I was able to enjoy a long, leisurely bath. After a while, I felt a little light-headed and got out to cool off, then got back into the tub. Maybe this decrepit-looking inn was a good choice after all, I thought. It

was certainly more peaceful than bathing with some noisy tour group, the way you do in the larger inns.

I was soaking in the bath for the third time when the monkey slid the glass door open with a clatter and came inside. "Excuse me," he said in a low voice. It took me a while to realize that he was a monkey. All the thick hot water had left me a bit dazed, and I'd never expected to hear a monkey speak, so I couldn't immediately make the connection between what I was seeing and the fact that this was an actual monkey. The monkey closed the door behind him, straightened out the little buckets that lay strewn about, and stuck a thermometer into the bath to check the temperature. He gazed intently at the dial on the thermometer, his eyes narrowed, for all the world like a bacteriologist isolating some new strain of pathogen.

"How is the bath?" the monkey asked me.

"It's very nice. Thank you," I said. My voice reverberated densely, softly, in the steam. It sounded almost mythological, not like my own voice but, rather, like an echo from the past returning from deep in the forest. And that echo was . . . hold on a second. What was a *monkey* doing here? And why was he speaking my language?

"Shall I scrub your back for you?" the monkey asked, his voice still low. He had the clear, alluring voice of a baritone in a doo-wop group. Not at all what you would expect. But nothing was odd about his voice: if you closed your eyes and listened, you'd think it was an ordinary person speaking.

"Yes, thanks," I replied. It wasn't as if I'd been sitting there hoping that someone would come and scrub my back, but if I turned him down I was afraid he might think I was opposed to having a monkey do it. I figured it was a kind offer on his part, and I certainly didn't want to hurt his feelings. So I slowly got up



"These are the very weapons your mother and I used in our famous duel."

out of the tub and plunked myself down on a little wooden platform, with my back to the monkey.

The monkey didn't have any clothes on. Which, of course, is usually the case for a monkey, so it didn't strike me as odd. He seemed to be fairly old; he had a lot of white in his hair. He brought over a small towel, rubbed soap on it, and with a practiced hand gave my back a good scrubbing.

"It's got very cold these days, hasn't it?" the monkey remarked.

"That it has."

"Before long this place will be covered in snow. And then they'll have to shovel snow from the roofs, which is no easy task, believe me."

There was a brief pause, and I jumped in. "So you can speak human language?"

"I can indeed," the monkey replied briskly. He was probably asked that a lot. "I was raised by humans from an early age, and before I knew it I was able to speak. I lived for quite a long time in Tokyo, in Shinagawa."

"What part of Shinagawa?"

"Around Gotenyama."

"That's a nice area."

"Yes, as you know, it's a very pleasant place to live. Nearby is the Gotenyama Garden, and I enjoyed the natural scenery there."

Our conversation paused at this point. The monkey continued firmly scrubbing my back (which felt great), and all the while I tried to puzzle things out rationally. A monkey raised in Shinagawa? The Gotenyama Garden? And such a fluent speaker? How was that possible? This was a *monkey*, for goodness' sake. A monkey, and nothing else.

"I live in Minato-ku," I said, a basically meaningless statement.

"We were almost neighbors, then," the monkey said in a friendly tone.

"What kind of person raised you in Shinagawa?" I asked.

"My master was a college professor. He specialized in physics, and held a chair at Tokyo Gakugei University."

"Quite an intellectual, then."

"He certainly was. He loved music more than anything, particularly the music of Bruckner and Richard Strauss. Thanks to which, I developed a fondness for that music myself. I heard it all the time. Picked up a knowledge of it without even realizing it, you could say."

"You enjoy Bruckner?"

"Yes. His Seventh Symphony. I always find the third movement particularly uplifting."

"I often listen to his Ninth Symphony," I chimed in. Another pretty meaningless statement.

"Yes, that's truly lovely music," the monkey said.

"So that professor taught you language?"

"He did. He didn't have any children, and, perhaps to compensate for that, he trained me fairly strictly whenever he had time. He was very patient, a person who valued order and regularity above all. He was a serious person whose favorite saying was that the repetition of accurate facts was the true road to wisdom. His wife was a quiet, sweet person, always kind to me. They got along well, and I hesitate to mention this to an outsider, but, believe me, their nighttime activities could be quite intense."

"Really," I said.

The monkey finally finished scrubbing my back. "Thanks for your patience," he said, and bowed his head.

"Thank you," I said. "It really felt good. So, do you work here at this inn?"

"I do. They've been kind enough to let me work here. The larger, more upscale inns would never hire a monkey. But they're always shorthanded around here and, if you can make yourself useful, they don't care if you're a monkey or whatever. For a monkey, the pay is minimal, and they let me work only where I can stay mostly out of sight. Straightening up the bath area, cleaning, things of that sort. Most guests would be shocked if a monkey served them tea and so on. Working in the kitchen is out, too, since I'd run into issues with the food-sanitation law."

"Have you been working here for a long time?" I asked.

"It's been about three years."

"But you must have gone through all sorts of things before you settled down here?"

The monkey gave a quick nod. "Very true."

I hesitated, but then came out and asked him, "If you don't mind, could you tell me more about your background?"

The monkey considered this, and then said, "Yes, that would be fine. It might not be as interesting as you expect, but I'm off work at ten and I could stop by your room after that. Would that be convenient?"

"Certainly," I replied. "I'd be grateful if you could bring some beer then."

"Understood. Some cold beers it is. Would Sapporo be all right?"

"That would be fine. So, you drink beer?"

"A little bit, yes."

"Then please bring two large bottles."

"Of course. If I understand correctly, you are staying in the Araiso Suite, on the second floor?"

"That's right," I said.

"It's a little strange, though, don't you think?" the monkey said. "An inn in the mountains with a room named *araiso*—'rugged shore.'" He chuckled. I'd never in my life heard a monkey laugh. But I guess monkeys do laugh, and even cry, at times. It shouldn't have surprised me, given that he was talking.

"By the way, do you have a name?" I asked.

"No, no name, *per se*. But everyone calls me the Shinagawa Monkey."

The monkey slid open the glass door, turned, and gave a polite bow, then slowly closed the door.

It was a little past ten when the monkey came to the Araiso Suite, bearing a tray with two large bottles of beer. In addition to the beer, the tray held a bottle opener, two glasses, and some snacks: dried, seasoned squid and a bag of *kakipi*—rice crackers with peanuts. Typical bar snacks. This was one attentive monkey.

The monkey was dressed now, in gray sweatpants and a thick, long-sleeved shirt with "I♥NY" printed on it, probably some kid's hand-me-downs.

There was no table in the room, so we sat, side by side, on some thin zabuton cushions, and leaned back against the wall. The monkey used the opener to pop the cap off one of the beers and poured out two glasses. Silently we clinked our glasses together in a little toast.

"Thanks for the drinks," the monkey said, and happily gulped the cold beer. I drank some as well. Honestly, it felt odd to be seated next to a monkey, sharing a beer, but I guess you get used to it.

"A beer after work can't be beat," the monkey said, wiping his mouth with the hairy back of his hand. "But, for a monkey, the opportunities to have a beer like this are few and far between."

"Do you live here at the inn?"

"Yes, there's a room, sort of an attic, where they let me sleep. There are mice from time to time, so it's hard to relax there, but I'm a monkey, so I have to be

thankful to have a bed to sleep in and three square meals a day. Not that it's paradise or anything."

The monkey had finished his first glass, so I poured him another.

"Much obliged," he said politely.

"Have you lived not just with humans but with your own kind? With other monkeys, I mean?" I asked. There were so many things I wanted to ask him.

"Yes, several times," the monkey answered, his face clouding over slightly. The wrinkles beside his eyes formed deep folds. "For various reasons, I was driven out, forcibly, from Shinagawa and released in Takasakiyama, the area down south that's famous for its monkey park. I thought at first that I could live peaceably there, but things didn't work out that way. The other monkeys were my dear comrades, don't get me wrong, but, having been raised in a human household, by the professor and his wife, I just couldn't express my feelings well to them. We had little in common, and communication wasn't easy. 'You talk funny,' they told me, and they sort of mocked me and bullied me. The female monkeys would giggle when they looked at me. Monkeys are extremely sensitive to the most minute differences. They found the way I acted comical, and it annoyed them, irritated them sometimes. It got harder for me to stay there, so eventually I went off on my own. Became a rogue monkey, in other words."

"It must have been lonely for you."

"Indeed it was. Nobody protected me, and I had to scrounge for food on



my own and somehow survive. But the worst thing was not having anyone to communicate with. I couldn't talk with monkeys or with humans. Isolation like that is heartrending. Takasakiyama is full of human visitors, but I couldn't just start up a conversation with whomever I happened to come across. Do that and there'd be hell to pay. The upshot was that I wound up sort of neither here nor

there, not part of human society, not part of the monkeys' world. It was a harrowing existence."

"And you couldn't listen to Bruckner, either."

"True. That's not part of my life now," the Shinagawa Monkey said, and drank some more beer. I studied his face, but, since it was red to begin with, I didn't notice it turning any redder. I figured this monkey could hold his liquor. Or maybe with monkeys you can't tell from their faces when they're drunk.

"The other thing that really tormented me was relations with females."

"I see," I said. "And by 'relations' with females you mean—?"

"In short, I didn't feel a speck of sexual desire for female monkeys. I had a lot of opportunities to be with them, but never really felt like it."

"So female monkeys didn't turn you on, even though you're a monkey yourself?"

"Yes. That's exactly right. It's embarrassing, but, honestly, I could only love human females."

I was silent and drained my glass of beer. I opened the bag of crunchy snacks and grabbed a handful. "That could lead to some real problems, I would think."

"Yes, real problems, indeed. Me being a monkey, after all, there was no way I could expect human females to respond to my desires. Plus, it runs counter to genetics."

I waited for him to go on. The monkey rubbed hard behind his ear and finally continued.

"So I had to find another method of ridding myself of my unfulfilled desires."

"What do you mean by 'another method'?"

The monkey frowned deeply. His red face turned a bit darker.

"You may not believe me," the monkey said. "You probably won't believe me, I should say. But, from a certain point on, I started stealing the names of the women I fell for."

"Stealing their names?"

"Correct. I'm not sure why, but I seem to have been born with a special talent for it. If I feel like it, I can steal somebody's name and make it my own."

A wave of confusion hit me.

"I'm not sure I get it," I said. "When you say you steal people's names, does

that mean that they completely lose their name?"

"No. They don't totally lose their name. I steal part of their name, a fragment. But when I take that part the name gets less substantial, lighter than before. Like when the sun clouds over and your shadow on the ground gets that much paler. And, depending on the person, they might not be aware of the loss. They just have a sense that something's a little off."

"But some do clearly realize it, right? That a part of their name has been stolen?"

"Yes, of course. Sometimes they find they can't remember their name. Quite inconvenient, a real bother, as you might imagine. And they may not even recognize their name for what it is. In some cases, they suffer through something close to an identity crisis. And it's all my fault, since I stole that person's name. I feel very sorry about that. I often feel the weight of a guilty conscience bearing down on me. I know it's wrong, yet I can't stop myself. I'm not trying to excuse my actions, but my dopamine levels force me to do it. Like there's a voice telling me, 'Hey, go ahead, steal the name. It's not like it's illegal or anything.'"

I folded my arms and studied the monkey. Dopamine? Finally, I spoke up. "And the names you steal are only those of the women you love or sexually desire. Do I have that right?"

"Exactly. I don't randomly steal just anybody's name."

"How many names have you stolen?"

With a serious expression, the monkey totalled it up on his fingers. As he counted, he was muttering something. He looked up. "Seven in all. I stole seven women's names."

Was this a lot, or not so many? Who could say?

"So how do you do it?" I asked. "If you don't mind telling me?"

"It's mostly by will power. Power of concentration, psychic energy. But that's not enough. I need something with the person's name actually written on it. An I.D. is ideal. A driver's license, student I.D., insurance card, or passport. Things of this sort. A nametag will work, too. Anyway, I need to get hold of an actual object like one of those. Usually, stealing is the only way. I'm pretty skilled at sneaking into people's rooms when

they're out. I scout around for something with their name on it and take it."

"So you use that object with the woman's name on it, along with your will power, to steal a name?"

"Precisely. I stare at the name that's written there for a long time, focussing my emotions, absorbing the name of the person I love. It takes a lot of time and is mentally and physically exhausting. I get completely engrossed in it, and somehow a part of the woman becomes a part of me. And my affection and my desire, which until then had no outlet, are safely satisfied."

"So there's nothing physical involved?"

The monkey nodded sharply. "I know I'm just a lowly monkey, but I never do anything unseemly. I make the name of the woman I love a part of me—that's plenty for me. I agree it's a bit perverted, but it's also a completely pure, platonic act. I simply possess a great love for that name inside me, secretly. Like a gentle breeze wafting over a meadow."

"Hmm," I said, impressed. "I guess you could even call that the ultimate form of romantic love."

"Agreed. But it's also the ultimate form of loneliness. Like two sides of a coin. The two extremes are stuck together and can never be separated."

Our conversation came to a halt here, and the monkey and I silently drank our beer, snacking on the *kakipi* and the dried squid.

"Have you stolen anyone's name recently?" I asked.

The monkey shook his head. He grabbed some of the stiff hair on his arm, as if making sure that he was, indeed, an actual monkey. "No, I haven't stolen anyone's name recently. After I came to this town, I made up my mind to put that kind of misconduct behind me. Thanks to which, the soul of this little monkey has found a measure of peace. I treasure the names of the seven women in my heart and live a quiet, tranquil life."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"I know this is quite forward of me, but I was wondering if you'd be kind enough to allow me to give my own opinion on the subject of love."

"Of course," I said.

The monkey blinked widely several times. His thick eyelashes waved up and down like palm fronds in the breeze. He

took a deep, slow breath, the kind of breath a long jumper takes before he starts his approach run.

"I believe that love is the indispensable fuel for us to go on living. Someday that love may end. Or it may never amount to anything. But even if love fades away, even if it's unrequited, you can still hold on to the memory of having loved someone, of having fallen in love with someone. And that's a valuable source of warmth. Without that heat source, a person's heart—and a monkey's heart, too—would turn into a bitterly cold, barren wasteland. A place where not a ray of sunlight falls, where the wildflowers of peace, the trees of hope, have no chance to grow. Here in my heart, I treasure the names of those seven beautiful women I loved." The monkey laid a palm on his hairy chest. "I plan to use these memories as my own little fuel source to burn on cold nights, to keep me warm as I live out what's left of my own personal life."

The monkey chuckled again, and lightly shook his head a few times.

"That's a strange way of putting it, isn't it?" he said. "*Personal* life. Given that I'm a monkey, not a *person*. Hee hee!"

It was eleven-thirty when we finally finished drinking the two large bottles of beer. "I should be going," the monkey said. "I got to feeling so good I ran off at the mouth, I'm afraid. My apologies."

"No, I found it an interesting story," I said. Maybe "interesting" wasn't the right word, though. I mean, sharing a beer and chatting with a monkey was a pretty unusual experience in and of itself. Add to that the fact that this particular monkey loved Bruckner and stole women's names because he was driven to by sexual desire (or perhaps love), and "interesting" didn't begin to describe it. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever heard. But I didn't want to stir up the monkey's emotions any more than was necessary, so I chose this more calming, neutral word.

As we said goodbye, I handed the monkey a thousand-yen bill as a tip. "It's not much," I said, "but please buy yourself something good to eat."

At first the monkey refused, but I insisted and he finally accepted it. He folded the bill and carefully slipped it into the pocket of his sweatpants.

"It's very kind of you," he said. "You've listened to my absurd life story, treated

YOU MISS IT WHEN IT'S GONE

On my last trip to a gay bar for the foreseeable future, my boyfriend and I played Jenga on a sofa outside. I pulled a piece from a nook. He slid one from a cranny. A bachelor party was next to us, and eventually someone ran into our tower of blocks. Immediately, fifteen pairs of hands, all of them various shades, stooped to gather the pieces. Our fingers touched from time to time, grazing wrists, and we laughed about the touching, didn't think twice.

Another time, in Austin, we found a gay bar on a nothing Saturday night. There was no reason for the place to be packed from wall to wall, with people breathing all over one another, sweating and pulsing and winding and shoving—but it was. We were. We were a blob of gas and air. At one point, I elbowed the guy shaking beside me, and after I apologized he touched my ear and said it was fine.

One night a few years back, at a gay bar in New Orleans, I was watching a drag show prep when a group of construction workers wandered in, holding helmets and kicking boots and already more than a little drunk. Some of the bar's regulars traded glances. The performers took the stage. Eventually, recognition rippled across the workers' faces. But one of them took a dollar bill from his pants, and his buddies followed, showering the stage. The performers pulled them onstage, where they continued to dance. We tipped, cheered.

One night, at a gay bar in Houston, I watched a group of guys huddled around a man who was flailing his hands, tickling the Christmas lights hanging above him. He looked maybe forty. He'd just come out. His friends stood beside him, reining their guy in, asking passersby to give him a kiss on the cheek to celebrate. A loose line formed beside them, ebbing and flowing with the music, congratulating and patting and chanting as though we'd all just won some championship.

Another night, at a bar in Doyama, nearly halfway across the world in Osaka's Umeda district, I spent a perfectly rainy hour drinking next to the only other patron. When we stepped outside, he kissed me, and then I watched him walk away. A little later, I told the friend I was staying with about it, and he narrowed his eyes and then rolled them into the back of his head.

One evening, at a dancy gay bar in Houston, sometime after eleven but almost certainly before one, the crowd reached that point in the evening where people start disrobing, loosening ties and opening buttons and wrapping hoodies around their waists. I don't remember much about the music or the conversations or any of that. But it was early February. So I remember the steam.

One night, a few days after the Pulse shooting, I sat in an Atlanta gay bar where nobody said anything at all. Instead, we touched the small of one another's back in passing and gently squeezed every neighboring shoulder.

One night, in New Orleans, I sat with a straight friend who had never been to a gay bar before. We vaped



on the balcony, and he noted the physical proximity of the space. Everyone stands so fucking close, he said. Just then, a man slipped between us, cupping our elbows, not even looking at us.

One night, at a gay bar in Tokyo, I sat with a group of strangers, laughing at something I can't recall, but it was enough to keep us from breathing. We'd come from Texas, Singapore, Toronto, San Francisco, London, and Seoul—I'd never met them before, and will almost certainly never meet them again. But still: we laughed until we were hoarse, leaning on one another's shoulders, basically crying.

One night, at a gay bar in Sydney, after a long night of pretending to drink with writers, I shared exactly one beer with a stranger. We talked about our jobs, and then bánh mì, and then video games, and then religion, and also the fact that he was a break-dancer. When I asked how that worked, he stood up. He motioned for me to follow. He'd pull a move, guiding my limbs until I did the same. We did that for nearly two hours, stumbling through the motions.

It's worth wondering how a space largely free of threats evolves when every space becomes a threat. It's worth wondering what the function of these spaces is, and whether they'll survive, and what their survival will mean as the nature of physical space continues to change. Some of us waited a long time for those spaces. Some might not mind waiting a bit longer. Some of us don't have time to wait. You miss it when it's gone.

But, before everything changed, there was one night—walking back to our car from a gay bar in Houston—when we skipped along the broken sidewalk, buzzed on proximity and beer and chilaquiles. Turning the corner, we ran into a guy staggering back to his own car, with his own people. We hugged in the street. Apologized. Kissed one another's cheeks. We said, Sorry, thank you, love you, be safe, goodbye. ♦

me to beer, and now this generous gesture. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

The monkey put the empty beer bottles and glasses on the tray and carried it out of the room.

The next morning, I checked out of the inn and went back to Tokyo. At the front desk, the creepy old man with no hair or eyebrows was nowhere to be seen, nor was the aged cat with the nose issues. Instead, there was a fat, surly middle-aged woman, and when I said I'd like to pay the additional charges for last night's bottles of beer she said, emphatically, that there were no incidental charges on my bill. "All we have here is canned beer from the vending machine," she insisted. "We never provide bottled beer."

Once again I was confused. I felt as though bits of reality and unreality were randomly changing places. But I had definitely shared two large bottles of Saporo beer with the monkey as I listened to his life story.

I was going to bring up the monkey with the middle-aged woman, but decided against it. Maybe the monkey didn't really exist, and it had all been an illusion, the product of a brain pickled by long soaks in the hot springs. Or maybe what I saw was a strange, realistic dream. If I came out with something like "You have an employee who's an elderly monkey who can speak, right?" things might

go sideways, and, worst-case scenario, she'd think I was insane. Chances were that the monkey was an off-the-books employee, and the inn couldn't acknowledge him publicly for fear of alerting the tax office or the health department.

On the train ride home, I mentally replayed everything the monkey had told me. I jotted down all the details, as best as I could remember them, in a notebook that I used for work, thinking that when I got back to Tokyo I'd write the whole thing out from start to finish.

If the monkey really *did* exist—and that was the only way I could see it—I wasn't at all sure how much I should accept of what he had told me over beer. It was hard to judge his story fairly. Was it really possible to steal women's names and possess them yourself? Was this some unique ability that only the Shinagawa Monkey had been given? Maybe the monkey was a pathological liar. Who could say? Naturally, I'd never heard of a monkey with mythomania before, but, if a monkey could speak a human language as skillfully as he did, it wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility for him to also be a habitual liar.

I'd interviewed numerous people as part of my work, and had become pretty good at sniffing out who could be believed and who couldn't. When someone talks for a while, you can pick up certain subtle hints and signals and get an intuitive sense of whether or not the

person is believable. And I just didn't get the feeling that what the Shinagawa Monkey had told me was a made-up story. The look in his eyes and his expression, the way he pondered things every once in a while, his pauses, gestures, the way he'd get stuck for words—nothing about it seemed artificial or forced. And, above all, there was the total, even painful honesty of his confession.

My relaxed solo journey over, I returned to the whirlwind routine of the city. Even when I don't have any major work-related assignments, somehow, as I get older, I find myself busier than ever. And time seems to steadily speed up. In the end I never told anyone about the Shinagawa Monkey, or wrote anything about him. Why try if no one would believe me? Unless I could provide proof—proof, that is, that the monkey actually existed—people would just say that I was "making stuff up again." And if I wrote about him as fiction the story would lack a clear focus or point. I could well imagine my editor looking puzzled and saying, "I hesitate to ask, since you're the author, but what is the theme of this story supposed to be?"

Theme? Can't say there is one. It's just about an old monkey who speaks human language, who scrubs guests' backs in the hot springs in a tiny town in Gunma Prefecture, who enjoys cold beer, falls in love with human women, and steals their names. Where's the theme in that? Or the moral?

And, as time passed, the memory of that hot-springs town began to fade. No matter how vivid memories may be, they can't conquer time.

But now, five years later, I've decided to write about it, based on the notes I scribbled down back then. All because something happened recently that got me thinking: If that incident hadn't taken place, I might well not be writing this.

I had a work-related appointment in the coffee lounge of a hotel in Akasaka. The person I was meeting was the editor of a travel magazine. A very attractive woman, thirty or so, petite, with long hair, a lovely complexion, and large, fetching eyes. She was an able editor. And still single. We'd worked together quite a few times, and got along well. After we'd taken care of work, we sat back and chatted over coffee for a while.



"Let's take our fun where we find it."

Her cell phone rang and she looked at me apologetically. I motioned to her to take the call. She checked the incoming number and answered it. It seemed to be about some reservation she'd made. At a restaurant, maybe, or a hotel, or a flight. Something along those lines. She talked for a while, checking her pocket planner, and then shot me a troubled look.

"I'm very sorry," she said to me in a small voice, her hand covering the phone. "This is a weird question, I know, but what's my name?"

I gasped, but, as casually as I could, I told her her full name. She nodded and relayed the information to the person on the other end of the line. Then she hung up and apologized to me again.

"I'm so sorry about that. All of a sudden I just couldn't remember my name. I'm so embarrassed."

"Does that happen sometimes?" I asked.

She seemed to hesitate, but finally nodded. "Yes, it's happening a lot these days. I just can't recall my name. It's like I've blacked out or something."

"Do you forget other things, too? Like you can't remember your birthday or your telephone number or a PIN number?"

She shook her head decisively. "No, not at all. I've always had a good memory. I know all my friends' birthdays by heart. I haven't forgotten anyone else's name, not even once. But, still, sometimes I can't remember my own name. I can't figure it out. After a couple of minutes, my memory comes back, but that couple of minutes is totally inconvenient, and I panic. It's like I'm not myself anymore. Do you think it's a sign of early-onset Alzheimer's?"

I sighed. "Medically, I don't know, but when did it start, you suddenly forgetting your name?"

She squinted and thought about it. "About half a year ago, I think. I remember it was when I went to enjoy the cherry blossoms. That was the first time."

"This might be an odd thing to ask, but did you lose anything at that time? Some sort of I.D., like a driver's license, a passport, an insurance card?"

She pursed her lips, lost in thought for a while, then replied. "You know, now that you mention it, I did lose my driver's license back then. It was lunchtime and I was sitting on a park bench, taking a break, and I put my handbag right

next to me on the bench. I was redoing my lipstick with my compact, and, when I looked back, the handbag was gone. I couldn't understand it. I'd looked away for only a second, and I didn't sense anyone nearby or hear any footsteps. I looked around, but I was alone. It was a quiet park, and I'm sure if somebody had come to steal my bag I would have noticed it."

I waited for her to go on.

"But that's not all that was strange. That same afternoon I got a call from the police, saying that my handbag had been found. It had been set outside a small police station near the park. The cash was still inside, as were my credit cards, A.T.M. card, and cell phone. All there, untouched. Only my driver's license was gone. The policeman was quite surprised. Who doesn't take the cash, only the license, and leaves the bag right outside a police station?"

I sighed quietly, but said nothing.

"This was the end of March. Right away, I went to the Motor Vehicles office in Samezu and had them issue a new license. The whole incident was pretty weird, but fortunately there wasn't any real harm done."

"Samezu is in Shinagawa, isn't it?"

"That's right. It's in Higashioi. My company's in Takanawa, so it's a quick taxi ride," she said. She gave me a doubtful look. "Do you think there's a connection? Between me not remembering my name and losing my license?"

I quickly shook my head. I couldn't exactly bring up the story of the Shinagawa Monkey.

"No, I don't think there's a connection," I said. "It just sort of popped into my head. Since it involves your name."

She looked unconvinced. I knew it was risky, but there was one more vital question I had to ask.

"By the way, have you seen any monkeys lately?"

"Monkeys?" she asked. "You mean the animals?"

"Yes, real live monkeys," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't think I've seen a monkey for years. Not in a zoo, or anywhere else."

Was the Shinagawa Monkey back to his old tricks? Or was another monkey using his M.O. to commit the same crime?

(A copy monkey?) Or was something else, other than a monkey, doing this?

I really didn't want to think that the Shinagawa Monkey was back to stealing names. He'd told me, quite matter-of-factly, that having seven women's names tucked inside him was plenty, and that he was happy simply living out his remaining years quietly in that little hot-springs town. And he'd seemed to mean it. But maybe the monkey had a chronic psychological condition, one that reason alone couldn't hold in check. And maybe his illness, and his dopamine, were urging him to *just do it!* And perhaps all that had brought him back to his old haunts in Shinagawa, back to his former, pernicious habits.

Maybe I'll try it myself sometime. On sleepless nights, that random, fanciful thought sometimes comes to me. I'll filch the I.D. or the nametag of a woman I love, focus on it like a laser, pull her name inside me, and possess a part of her, all to myself. What would that feel like?

No. That'll never happen. I've never been deft with my hands, and would never be able to steal something that belonged to someone else. Even if that *something* had no physical form, and stealing it wasn't against the law.

Extreme love, extreme loneliness. Ever since then, whenever I listen to a Bruckner symphony I ponder that Shinagawa Monkey's *personal life*. I picture the elderly monkey in that tiny hot-springs town, in an attic in a rundown inn, asleep on a thin futon. And I think of the snacks—the *kakipi* and the dried squid—that we enjoyed as we drank beer together, propped up against the wall.

I haven't seen the beautiful travel-magazine editor since then, so I have no idea what fate befell her name after that. I hope it didn't cause her any real hardship. She was blameless, after all. Nothing was her fault. I do feel bad about it, but I still can't bring myself to tell her about the Shinagawa Monkey. ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)





WHITE NOISE

BY EMMA CLINE

The dreams had mostly stopped. Still, he found himself awake, blinking in the dark room. Four A.M. He lay unmoving for a moment under the duvet. His T-shirt was stuck to his back—night sweats, the pillow swampy, the sheets damp. Roll to the other side. Spread out on the chilly sheets. Keep the eyes closed. As soon as both eyes opened, it would be straight to dull business, an organizer already laid out with his morning meds, a bottle of room-temperature Fiji water alongside.

This time tomorrow, he would know everything. Well, not exactly this time, more like 10 A.M., but, in any case, all would be decided. He believed, truly, that he would be exonerated. How could he not be? This was America. Maybe there was a moment, a day or two right when this all began, when he believed that this might be it, the end of the road. He understood Epstein hanging himself in his cell—because what would life look like, afterward? No more dinner parties, no more respect, no buffer of fear and admiration that kept you in a kind of pleasant trance, the world shaping itself around you.

And, yes, there was a moment when people no longer returned his calls, looked away from him on the street, no room at the inn, etc. But, almost as quickly, other people showed up, rushed to fill the void. Came to his Super Bowl party, let him use country houses, consult with family lawyers. He was staying at Vogel's Connecticut house now, for example. A man wouldn't let another man stay in his home if he was truly a leper.

He was fully awake now, adrenaline lighting up his brain, the itch to make plans, get to work. He turned on the bedside light and sat against the pillows. He guzzled the last of the stale water, groped for his legal pad. It was better, he'd learned, after the punishing rounds of discovery, to keep lists on paper. Papers got misplaced, papers disappeared.

He called Joan. "This is off the record," he said, instantly.

Her voice was sleepy. "Hello?"

"Do you agree?" he said. "I need a verbal."

"Harvey?" she said.

"A verbal," he said. "Off the record."

"Sure, Harvey."

He heard someone in the background. "Who is that?"

"It's Jerry. We're in bed."

"Well, get out of bed, O.K.? This is for your ears only. I'll call back in five."

Joan liked him. Legitimately liked him. She was tough, no-nonsense, but happy to soft-pedal an actor's D.U.I. in return for a lengthy profile, gladly accepted screening invitations and was a reliable fixture at after-parties. They'd had fun times. The junket for the film that he'd triaged out of near-disaster: Harvey had hunkered down in Sag and basically rewritten the script, while the director was hauled out of rehab and barely propped up by a team of A.D.s. An Academy campaign. The liaison in Japan who took them to Gold Bar—the only white people in the place. Uni on filet mignon, a skinny press assistant hanging around who wouldn't touch it. Who cringed when he put his arm around her, cowering on the banquette. They'd left her at the place, as a joke. As he remembered it. Let her try to find her way back to the hotel at 3 A.M. in Tokyo. This was before phones, when people got legitimately lost. And, as he remembered, Joan hadn't exactly gone out of her way to help the girl, or insist they take her home. She had thought it was funny, too.

He dialed again.

Joan answered on the first ring.

"I want to give you the first interview after I'm exonerated," he said. "I do. But I want to make sure you have all the facts, all the facts. 'Cause there is a lot," he said, "a lot that has been suppressed in this case. You would be shocked to find out even a fraction of what the other side buried—"

"O.K., Harvey. I'm just walking downstairs, O.K.? Just hold your horses."

"And this is off the record, Joan."

"Yes, Harvey."

"This time tomorrow"—he corrected himself—"or, you know, tomorrow, not sure when, specifically, this whole case will be revealed for what it is: an elaborate fraud, an attempt to litigate regret and make me a scapegoat. A fraud, it bears saying, that you and your cohorts at the so-called paper of record were willing participants in. A lot of very bad actors there, your colleagues. Some might say there's a civil RICO case to be made against you—"

She didn't respond.

"Joan?"

"Sorry, my kid has an ear infection, I think she's awake. Can you hold on a second?"

He hung up the phone.

Time to get dressed, start the whole mess again. The Loro Piana half-zip, navy, good American bluejeans. The ankle bracelet was slim enough that it actually did seem more like a bracelet. Even as light as it was, it messed with his stride, this little annoyance, ever present, never quite fading into the background. Enough clearance underneath to pull up his thin red socks. Socks from the place the Pope gets his. Tomato red, cotton lisle, made in this tiny shop by the Vatican.

He splashed his face with water. Tightened his belt. He was losing weight. Funny that this was what it took, in the end. Not the hugely expensive doctors, the sachets of vitamins meant to replace meals, the overnight sleep study at Weill Cornell and daily Pilates instruction. All it took, it turned out, was total annihilation. Attempted annihilation, he corrected himself, the threat of annihilation.

"There's been an assassination attempt," he heard in his head, as if from a news announcer, "an attempt on the President's life." This had been a recurring thought lately: an assassination attempt, an assassination attempt. He had

survived an assassination attempt. Because how else could you describe what they were trying to do to him? The shocking, incredible resources they had marshalled against one man? He was just a man, just one man in red socks and a too-thin T-shirt, an ache in his left molar, a bad back that was basically on the verge of collapse, all his cartilage scraped away so his spine was a teetering Jenga stack of disks.

A little frightening, the carpeted stairs, his ankles feeling hollow and frail. He gripped the bannister. Better to just take the elevator from now on, one of the reasons Vogel had offered the house up, that cheesy elevator.

Downstairs was quiet, the rooms dark, though a few lights were on in the kitchen. He'd assumed no one was awake, but then Gabe stepped out from the pantry. He was fully dressed, face bright and avid.

"Good morning," Gabe said, smoothly, as if this were a normal hour, as if it weren't only 5 A.M. Harvey supposed that was what Gabe's job entailed, being perpetually unsurprised. "Can I get you a little breakfast? Coffee?"

"Coffee, yes." Harvey patted his stom-

ach, absently. "Breakfast, no, not yet. My juice, the regular."

"Certainly. The breakfast room is all set up. Let me know if you need anything else."

Gabe brought in the coffee, the glass of juice. Grapefruit juice interfered with Harvey's Lipitor. So lately he was allowed only a splash with seltzer. He missed the full glass, the scathing mouthful that used to start every day. Four newspapers were lined up in tidy order alongside the placemat—he'd gotten used to blurring his vision a little, preemptively, just to lessen the shock upon encountering his own face suddenly on the front page, his name swimming above the fold.

Seeing the photos had been rough, worse than he'd imagined. You let go of a lot of things, had to get used to shame, but it was hard to totally abandon vanity. Harvey hobbling with the walker, the suit that the lawyers had insisted be slightly ill-fitting, slightly cheap. They wanted to make everyone feel sorry for him. A strange pose to take, at least in public. It was, he supposed, what he used to do easily enough in private—my mother died today, he said, watching the girl's face change. I'm so lonely, just sit with me a minute, just lie here

with me. Patting the hotel bed, over and over. Gripping a wrist with his face in a moue of sorrow—come on, he said, come on. Be a nice girl, not a sour one. I gave you a massage. Now you can give me one. It's only fair.

He aimed the remote at the big television. It took up almost the whole wall, a very Master of the Universe, situation-room setup, a little rich for Vogel, who was, essentially, a money manager. He clicked the remote once, clicked twice. The screen remained blank.

"Gabe," he called out. Nothing. "Gabe," he said, louder, aware of how aggro his voice sounded, a bark, really, exactly what people expected from him. He should watch himself, just get into the habit of corraling certain impulses, though who was here to make a note of any bad behavior except Gabe?

"Of course," Gabe said, taking the remote. He was so anodyne, so mild—hard to imagine him having sex, eating food, meeting any human need. He asked what channel Harvey would like.

News, naturally. On mute.

The sun was not visible yet, but the light had changed. A new day, time to get to work. He dialled the lawyer's number. It went straight to voice mail. He dialled again. The same. And again.

The coffee was cold. Gabe brought a new carafe before Harvey could shout for him.

As Gabe poured a fresh cup, the possibility of God considering Harvey's fate floated across his mind: a frowning white-bearded daddy gazing down, making a list of his good deeds, his failings. Like maybe this would be taken into account tomorrow. Affect the verdict.

Harvey forced himself to catch Gabe's gaze, forced himself to smile. "Thanks," he said, smiling hard so his eyes crinkled, and Gabe smiled back, pleasantly, though his brow furrowed a little and he seemed to be in a hurry to leave the room.

O.K., the day had barely started and already he was being kind, making moves. On the giant screen a blonde in a red fitted dress was leaning on the news desk, staring feverishly into the camera, and Harvey stared back, downing the cup of coffee. She was gesturing at numbers on a green screen, numbers that he didn't understand yet, numbers that meant nothing to him,



"Oh, I've always wanted to pretend to want to hike the Appalachian Trail."

but soon enough the blond woman would reward his attentions: the context would be explained, the meaning revealed.

He went outside to make a few calls, putting on a waxed barn jacket from the front closet. Sure, all the staff had signed N.D.A.s, but better to be careful. He strode far enough away that Vogel's house—a boxy brick Colonial with flickering gas lamps, likely repro, at the gravel entry circle—was barely in sight, though now the neighbor's driveway was visible. Vogel should landscape this out, so you didn't have to gaze on the neighbors, or, more important, so the neighbors didn't gaze on you.

The sun was up now, a thin disk that offered no warmth, even as dew started to drip from the hedges. Nature was revving itself up. He was chatting to Nancy, the most loyal of the assistants. Nancy, with her M.S. boyfriend and schizo mother, her sad Minnesota childhood—she would never leave him.

"Harvey?" Nancy was saying. "Kristin wants to come up around three, she wants to leave the city before traffic. Is that O.K.?"

A turning, a shift—something drew his eye across the vast lawn, above the hedges. A man, opening the front door of the house next door, padding outside in old-fashioned pajamas, a puffy coat. He paused for a moment, tilting his gray face to the chilly sun. Then he walked down the steps and made his way along the driveway to the front gate. Did he see Harvey standing there? He didn't appear to. He stooped to pick up the blue plastic bundle of the newspaper, then walked back to the terrace. He sat on a wooden bench, wriggling the paper from its sleeve.

What was it about the man's face?

"Harvey?" Nancy was saying.

"Sure, sure," he said. "Kristin. Three."

"She's bringing Ruby."

"Mmm."

The man shook the paper open, though now he stopped reading to sweep some debris from the seat of the bench. He was near enough that Harvey could see the two sad clouds of eyebrows, wispy, fading. Why did he know this face?

"And Dr. Farrokhzad is coming at eleven. They'll set up in the guest bedroom. They wanted me to remind you, no liquids for at least two hours before-

hand. O.K.? And definitely no food."

"Got it," he said. Loud enough that the man looked over.

Nancy was droning on—a bankruptcy lien, some claimant who'd worked in the Holmby Hills house coming out of the woodwork. And then all at once he placed the man next door. A shock, but then, when Harvey thought about it, why should it be a surprise? He was a private man, famously so—why wouldn't he be in Connecticut, making a life among these people? Like a secret agent, embedded in plain sight. Harvey hung up on Nancy. His whole body was aimed at the man, his brain vibrating. How could he indicate, in the tone of his voice, his expression, that, yes, he knew exactly who the man was, and, no, he wouldn't make a fuss?

"Morning," Harvey called across the fence, a cheery, neighborly greeting, and Don DeLillo lifted his hand in a wave.

"Nice day," Don DeLillo said. He got to his feet, ambling closer to Harvey.

"Beautiful day," Harvey said, his heart pounding with glee, and it felt like they were speaking in code, a mutually agreed-upon code. A thrill just to make contact. A meeting of equals.

"Field sparrow," Don DeLillo said.

"Hmm?"

"There's a field sparrow," Don DeLillo said. He pointed—Harvey followed the line of his finger until he spotted it: a small brown bird, like a mouse, hopping in the icy gravel. It was dull, the color of dishwater.

"Very rare bird," Don DeLillo mused. "This time of year. Never had one before."

"Interesting," Harvey said.

"I've heard of them showing up after storms, you know. Adverse conditions."

"Right."

They were communicating something, a hidden message coursing underneath this conversation—Do you know who I am? Don DeLillo was asking. Can I trust you? Are you on the level?

Yes, Harvey was trying to send back, straining to be absolutely clear, straining to communicate the entirety of his soul in a pressurized beam of light straight to Don DeLillo's being: yes, you can trust me, yes, I'm on the level.

"Well," Don DeLillo said, squinting at the sun, squinting at the mousy bird. "I'll see you."

"Yes," Harvey said, his eyes unblinking, his voice freighted. "Yes, I'll see you soon."

Harvey could visualize the plan, see each step of the process, the whole thing unfolding cleanly in his mind's eye without any hiccups or stutters. "White Noise," the unfilmable book. Harvey's comeback. Why would he find himself here, on this earth, in the year 2020, if not for this exact purpose?

The rights were available—Nancy found out in two minutes. Of course they were, because everything would go smoothly this time. His head was spinning. He'd seen attempts, back in the day. Recalled a script for that

weirdo hockey novel Don DeLillo wrote under a pseudonym, another script kicking around for the football book. Hadn't Rudin had the rights, for a hot minute?

What was that first line? He tried to remember. A screaming comes across the sky! A screaming. Beautiful. Vicious. A great first line. Maybe float a presentation card with the text, not strain to be too literal, try to squeeze an arty image out of it. Just let it land in the original form. *A screaming comes across the sky.* That was confidence. Already he was overwhelmed—calls to make, people to recruit. Draw up some preliminary numbers. But this felt right, exactly right. The perfect thing to jump into the moment, the very second that this circus ended and he was declared innocent. Thank you, he beamed out to the world, thank you. One of the couples therapists had suggested the keeping of a gratitude journal—even his ex-wife had snorted at that idea—but here he was, appreciating his blessings.

The buzz of his phone. The law firm. Finally.

"Hello, team," Rory said. When Rory had signed on to Harvey's defense, the papers had taken great glee in publishing a photo, gleaned from Rory's daughter's Facebook, of Rory in a pink pussy hat and aviator sunglasses, accompanying his daughter to the Women's March.

There were at least five people on



the call. Harvey could not quite tell what they were saying. People kept cutting each other off—"If I can just jump in for a second"; "piggybacking off Rory's point about an immediate motion"—and now they were talking about what the next steps would be if there was another delay, what protections they could put in place for the walk out of the courthouse. None of them seemed to address the real question.

"But," Harvey interrupted, "what's going to happen? They're going to say I'm innocent, right? Not guilty. Isn't that what you promised?"

"Now, Harvey," Rory said, his twenty-three-hundred-an-hour voice oozing through the phone. "We are just going through what will happen, hypothetically. Just to cover all the bases. We've mounted a tremendous defense, and I think there's not one thing we could have done better. But. You know we can't promise anything."

"Then why," Harvey said, wiping his damp brow, "the *fuck* would you say anything?"

The mood shifted.

"Sorry." He was still aware that God was tracking these moments of politeness, these moments of catching himself. Or not catching himself. "You guys read 'White Noise'?" he said.

Silence on the line.

"Come on, how many people are on this call, five? Aren't you all Ivy League boys? None of you fuckers read 'White Noise'?"

The silence was uneasy.

"Don DeLillo. American master. 'A screaming comes across the sky,'" Harvey said. He said it again, his voice dropped an octave. "A screaming," he said. "Comes across. *The sky*."

"Isn't that 'Gravity's Rainbow'?"

He didn't recognize the voice. "Who said that?"

Rory edged in. "Harvey, excuse me—"

"Who. The fuck. Said that? I don't know you. Why the fuck are you on this call if I don't know you? Isn't that illegal?"

Rory again. "Harvey, that's Ted, he's been in court with us every day."

"I don't fucking know a Ted."

"Harvey—"

"Never mind," Harvey said. "I'll check in later."

"Try to relax," Rory said, "and just

remember—" Harvey ended the call.

A quick Google, and, yes, it was fucking "Gravity's Rainbow." Well. So what. He'd been close, and the gist was the same, wasn't it? A rending of the known world. That was the whole fucking point.

Enough time, before the 11 A.M. doctor visit, to watch some things down in the screening room. They still had him on the list for new releases, though they seemed to arrive a week or two late now, and the union projectionist was hard to coax out of the city. One of the subtle ways he was punished, these days. In their absence, he found himself watching television—up until recently, he had somehow been unaware of just how many television shows there were, the astonishing glut of content that had been barfed out and was just waiting patiently to be consumed.

The screening room was on the lowest level. Easiest to just take the elevator. Squat leather couches, each with a blanket folded neatly on its arm. In the back, there was a refrigerator, well-stocked baskets of food: chips, candy in a drawer. He shouldn't. But he did—a jumbo box of Junior Mints. Who was here to stop him?

He'd been watching a show set in Chernobyl—probably eight or ten mil an episode, if he had to guess. The whole "Saving Private Ryan" chopper thing going on, sooty-faced character actors who looked like guys from his childhood neighborhood in Queens, a passel of dogs roaming through an impeccable set. Incredible, the things they were doing these days. The amount of money, almost perverse! And this got him jazzed all over again, this DeLillo project, because how could anyone argue with this level of production value, this impact? They were the culture-makers, he'd always believed—everything trickled down from people like him, choices made in a certain room in a certain office in Manhattan, choices that shaped the discourse. And even Don DeLillo would respect that. Though how much better to approach him only after the public vindication—hands clean, blank slate.

A handful of Junior Mints mashed against the roof of his mouth. The sugar made his bad molar zing. He stopped, considered a single waxy Junior Mint balanced on the end of his finger. Study

the dimpled chocolate, observe the pleasing chestnut sheen. A form of meditation, he congratulated himself.

Like his mantra from that trip to Kashmir—the producers had gone way over budget, Harvey swooping in to whip things into shape. That weekend, George had insisted they all charter a plane to go visit this famous guru. The Beatles got their mantra from this guy, George told them.

It had been a miserable trip, monsoon season or some such, his armpits rashy. All Harvey drank was Coca-Cola and bottles of warm water, took blown-out shirts on the hour. The whole gang of them arrived at this guru's place, the breezy arcades and Dentyne white of the walls. They were supposed to go in, one by one, sit at the feet of this emaciated guru in his caftan. Receive their life-changing mantras, each one specific to each person, your mantra somehow the exact mantra that would correct all your life's ills.

The guru stared out at Harvey from his little skull. Harvey had made himself hold the guy's gaze. As the guru leaned forward, placed a dry hand on Harvey's head, he whispered Harvey's mantra. But Harvey sniffled just at that moment, the Coca-Cola he'd pounded on the way over bubbling up behind his sinuses, and he couldn't make out the mantra.

And here's the rub—the guru would never, it turned out, repeat the mantra.

"Are you kidding?"

But the guru wasn't kidding. Harvey got angry. "Please," he said. "Come on. I'll pay you. Whatever you want. Just repeat it. Write it down if you don't wanna say it. Whatever, O.K.?"

The man just looked at him placidly.

On the flight back, queasy from the diarrhea meds, his headphones blocking out the world, Harvey slept fitfully. When he woke up, there was his assistant, across the aisle, alert to whatever his next request would be. She'd gotten a mantra, too. He took the empty seat next to her.

"So." He tented his fingers, leaned on the armrest. "Crazy trip, right? Funny?"

"Yeah," she said, cautiously. "If you're wondering about Helen, she knows we want the full breakdown by Monday, and I'm just waiting to hear back from B team—"

"I don't need to talk about work right

MORE

How again after months there is awe.
The most personal moment of the day
appears unannounced. People wear leather.
People refuse to die. There are strangers
who look like they could know your name.
And the smell of a bar on a cold night,
or the sound of traffic as it follows you home.
Sirens. Parties. How balconies hold us.
Whatever enough is, it hasn't arrived.
And on some dead afternoon
when you'll likely forget this,
as you browse through the vintage
again and again—there it is,
what everyone's given up
just to stay here. Jewelled hairpins,
scratched records, their fast youth.
Everything they've given up
to stay here and find more.

—Alex Dimitrov

now,” Harvey said. “I’m just chatting.
Can’t we just chat?”

Her smile flickered.

“You have a good time?” Harvey asked.

“Um. Yeah. It’s been interesting.”

“You’ve never been to India, right?”

He was just guessing.

She blinked behind her glasses. “No,
never. A really beautiful country,” she
said. “Really inspiring.”

“Right.”

The silence made the girl squirm.

“So, you know,” Harvey said. “Tell
me what your mantra is.”

She shifted, uncomfortable. “Come
on,” she said. Trying to giggle. “You’re
never supposed to tell what your man-
tra is.”

“Oh, please,” he said. “You don’t be-
lieve that stuff. I think you should just
tell me.”

“I really shouldn’t,” she said.

But here was the thing. They both
knew, as soon as he asked the question,
that she would tell him her mantra. It
was just a matter of how long it would
take, what the moments between his
demand and her capitulation would look
like. In the end, it would be the same
to him as any other moment of triumph.
Only the in-between was different, made
up of a different sequence of conces-
sions, the particulars of each person.

Some people resisted, some people did
not. Some people went still, unmoving;
some people started laughing, out of
discomfort. He enjoyed it all, even these
milder victories—it was like different
flavors of ice cream. And, ultimately,
he was always sated, the other person
breathing hard, squinting, shifting, some
new shame in her face.

Now he woke in Vogel’s screening
room to the looping menu screen, the
season over, his hands smeared with
Junior Mints. A glance at his phone—
twenty minutes before the doctor arrived.
An infusion for his back pain, some-
thing he’d never tried before.

Enough time to splash his face up-
stairs, swish around a little toothpaste,
change his shirt. His eyes were blood-
shot, his throat sore.

Harvey lay on his bed with his shoes
on. Or not his bed. Vogel’s bed. He missed
his own bed. No way to keep the bed,
was the gist. His ex-wife wanted the bed,
among other things. She got the bed,
and most everything else. Now she was
sleeping on the horsehair and cashmere.
She’d been interviewed by *Vogue*, her por-
trait taken by that photographer who
shot everyone like they were in a Cadil-
lac commercial or a police procedural.
Very network. His ex-wife’s gaze was
downcast, a waif dressed in a thick knit

sweater and a long skirt, perched on a
boulder by the rocky shoreline. She looked
brave, sorrowful, as if she’d persevered
through a great difficulty. Probably she
could not have designed a better exit for
herself, as clean and frictionless as slip-
ping away from a party.

Harvey refreshed his e-mail. Refreshed
the news sites. He searched his name,
scanning the comments sections, a re-
cent habit. Or more of a compulsion,
forcing himself to wade through the vit-
riol until he came across at least one nice
comment. He took it as an omen, and
as soon as he read that single nice com-
ment he was released. It took a while,
this time, but he found one:

Maverick1972: *It’s verrry INTER-
ESTING how the girls are suddenly
crying when they were asking for jobs and
cars at the time! Harvey isn’t a monster its
not his fault hes got what they wanted and
took what he could who would blame him!!!!*

Not the most eloquent defender, Mav-
erick1972, but it gave him heart, a little
rush of victory. And why shouldn’t he
feel confident? One of the younger law-
yers had e-mailed him PDFs of all the
exhibits, shown him how to scroll through
the evidence they’d amassed over the
past two years. A simple glance and it
was all there: photos of every single one
of them, hugging him. Kissing his cheek!
Pushing themselves into him, pressing
their faces to his face, practically hump-
ing him there on the step-and-repeat.

Uncle Harvey, they called him,
afterward.

Gabe knocked on the door. Time for
the infusion. A new way they were treat-
ing chronic pain, a new attempt to miti-
gate the constant shock from his spine,
his body a bombed-out war zone: the
only thing that helped lately was the
horse pills, swimmy Vicodin afternoons
light-headed in the sauna, scratching
his chest and arms, slapping his limp
dick without any response. He’d forgot-
ten he wasn’t supposed to drink water
before the infusion, much less house a
box of Junior Mints, but probably, like
most suggestions, it didn’t really matter.

Harvey got to his feet, with some effort.
Groped for his phone. An e-mail he’d
started to Nancy—cc Lewis, Honor Keat-
ing, a few of the sharper guys from the
old days, people who’d been waiting to
hear what he was kicking around. He
was like Bob Evans, he thought, his heart

stirring, marshalling Towne and Nicholson to make “Chinatown.” And here it was—the perfect property, his very own “Chinatown,” only better, because it didn’t need that little creep Polanski to rewrite the whole thing. Though, it was worth pointing out, look what had happened to Polanski—sex with a thirteen-year-old—anal!—and he’d basically been sentenced to parole, no jail time. Everything ruined by a few unfortunate press photos leaking when he was supposed to be in preproduction. Despite all that, Polanski was still making movies, still skiing the Swiss Alps with pals and winning awards. Harvey was small potatoes, compared. These were grown women.

How could anyone think Harvey belonged in jail? It was so unlikely. He’d only half listened to the jail consultant, a meeting set up in Rory’s conference room. The man had tried to scare Harvey, slamming the table hard when he saw Harvey was on his phone.

“Do you think this is a joke?” the man had screamed, neck ropy above his polo shirt, spittle flying from his mouth and landing, to Harvey’s disgust, on his own lips. He wiped it away, deliberately. Went back to his e-mails.

“White Noise”—they could make a real art-house push, emphasize that this was an old-fashioned movie, a classic. What Bob Evans would call a people picture. Get Brian on the phone. In time for next awards season—it wasn’t a crazy goal, wasn’t a totally unrealistic timeline. People wanted to help him. He had a million favors left to call in.

He shuffled to the guest room, still typing on his phone. “Now is the PERFECT TIME to do this MOVIE,” he wrote. “we as a nation are hungry 4 meaning.”

The curtains in the guest room were drawn, but the lights had been turned up to a blazing wash, a fat leather recliner pulled into the center of the room, a whole setup already plugged in and humming away—a bursting I.V. sack, a heart monitor, a silver tray of anti-septic swabs and packaged needles.

“NancY pls get Numbers pulled 2gether aSAP so I cn present 2 don delillo 2morrow eve, find out if thre is nice resto nearby, make a res, he can bring wife is f he has or gf?”

The doctor came in—tan, sexless, a chain around his neck, and hairless forearms. Plum-colored scrubs. Had he done that on purpose, removed all his body hair?

“Sir?” the doctor said.

Harvey didn’t look up from his phone.

“Sir?”

“Jesus, what?”

“I just need your finger, sir. Let’s just slip this on,” the doctor said, clipping a pulse monitor on his ring finger. Harvey pretended not to notice the man’s smirk. Fuck him. Fuck the hairless doctor.

“O.K.,” the doctor said.

“Remember the basics from the phone consultation?”

Harvey stared at him—Gabe had done the required phone call in Harvey’s place. He nodded.

“We’ve been starting people at a hundred, for chronic pain like yours. How does that sound?”

Harvey shrugged. “Let’s do more.”

“It might be best to just see how you respond at a hundred.”

“More,” Harvey said, mildly, and watched the doctor start to respond. “More,” Harvey said again, smiling a little, “more,” and the doctor finally gave up, sensing, maybe, that Harvey could keep this up as long as it took.

“O.K.,” the doctor said, brightly, “let’s do one-thirty-five,” as if he had been the one to suggest it. He left, and a nurse came in.

The nurse was named Anastasia, a Russian with bleached hair and too-dark eyebrows. Shapeless scrubs, a pair of white Keds, tightly laced. She was brusque but not unkind.

“And how are you, Anastasia?” Harvey said.

“Good,” she said, cheerful. She was maybe twenty-five.

“Having a good day?”

She made a face, then smiled. “Back at work, you know. It’s fine.”

“Right. You do anything fun lately?”

She didn’t seem at all bothered by his questions, happy to chat. “I went on vacation with my husband.”

“Oh, yeah?” he said. “Where did you go with this husband?”

“Have you been to Miami?”

“Have I been to Miami?” he said.

“Yeah, sure. Sure I’ve been to Miami.”

“We went. Me and my husband. I think he liked it more than me. He saw, he liked the”—she stopped, made a ballooning gesture in front of her flat chest. “All the swimsuits. His eyes were, like, pow,” she said, a googly expression on her face. “I think he wanted to stay.”

“Sounds like a real dick, Anastasia.”

She giggled. Amazing, these Soviet girls, just happy to have a husband. Probably husbands who knocked them around a little, why not. The things he could do for Anastasia, if she gave even the slightest indication of receptivity. He reminded himself to ask Gabe to find out more about her. Who was this husband? Some pale Russian with sunken eyes, guzzling protein shakes from Costco, probably a pit bull in the back yard.

Harvey adjusted himself in the big leather chair.

“Comfy?” Anastasia said.

“Mmm.”

They mixed in an anti-emetic, and a little Xanax, too, so people didn’t freak out, Anastasia explained. “So you won’t even be worried.”

The doctor came back in, smiley, fratty.

“And are we feeling ready?” He looked only at the air around Harvey, no longer making direct eye contact. Good. Let the doctor be afraid. He’d signed an N.D.A., they all did.

The machine was the size of a toaster. A thin tube hooked up to a port in the back of his hand. Anastasia prepared the area with a shot of lidocaine. Had him make a fist.

“Big strong veins!” she cooed.

He looked away when she inserted the I.V. Didn’t want to think of the veins right there, under the surface. Unsettling how it took mere seconds to gain access to his insides, open him up.

“O.K.,” the doctor said. “O.K. All set?”

Harvey felt his phone buzz in his pocket. “Hold on,” he said.

“Don’t jostle the I.V.”

It was not, as he guessed, an e-mail from the producers. Just an e-mail from his accountant: “Sending good thoughts for tomorrow.” Yes, sure, Dave, thanks for your good thoughts. None of your thoughts are good thoughts, that’s why you’re an accountant.

Harvey said, “Is this going to be scary, Anastasia? Are you going to watch over me?”



She laughed. "Yes," she said. "Nothing to worry about." She put the eye mask over his face. Got even closer to adjust the strap. He wished he had used the trimmer—he had a corsage of wiry black hairs at each ear. He had the feeling, lately, when he looked in the mirror, that a pile of glue was staring back at him, like he was melting.

"O.K.," Anastasia's voice came, faint from the new darkness. "Now I put on the headphones. Yes?"

They were big, noise-cancelling. "Blanket," he said. Then reminded himself to throw in a "please."

Yes. A heavy fur blanket pulled over his body, tucked by Anastasia right up under his chin. Maternally, gently. He couldn't remember if he had sent the e-mail to Nancy—he should do that, he thought, quickly, make sure that ball got rolling. But where was his phone? No matter. He no longer cared where his phone was. Because here it was, it had arrived:

The cool whoosh of the future in his veins.

Ah. Ahh.

Had he yelled the word "help"? Or just mouthed it. Whatever panic he felt had appeared and disappeared in the same instant.

Welcome, the void said. We've been waiting for you.

Then his body started to rise, like a balloon nearing the ceiling, bobbing lightly. Wow, he thought, mildly. A nice drift over the city. What city? I don't know. A city. Maybe the city from the Apple TV screen saver, a generic grid twinkling below. He was moving so slowly.

When he tried to squeeze his brain around any future plans, around making the movie, his thoughts just slipped away. All he could think of was the words "white noise." White noise, yes—how better to describe what this feeling was?

Why couldn't all of life be this way, this uninflected witnessing, the relief of being a vegetable? Keep him hooked up to the machine, doctor. Twenty-four hours a day, just let him rest.

Bye!

Bye, Harvey!

What was Harvey but a cardboard cutout, really, an idea of himself? How funny that he had ever cared so much.

After maybe an hour, the sensations started to fade. He felt a familiar sorrow, like when, as a kid, he could sense the end of a movie nearing, knowing soon it would all be over, knowing that soon he would be returned to the harsh reality of the world and its disappointments.

Harvey was legitimately bereft. He pushed the eye mask away from his eyes with a clumsy hand—it felt like he was wearing mittens. And then the feeling was replaced with the information—curious!—that he was now lying on the floor. It didn't feel any different from being in the chair. He remained on the floor, very still. Feeling his chest rise and fall.

Anastasia opened the door, made a noise of surprise, then left. She returned with the doctor. Together they worked to hoist Harvey back into the chair. His legs felt weak. But he was smiling, a big dopey smile.

"You fell," the doctor said.

"I didn't feel anything."

"That's normal."

He had to pee, badly, his bladder glowing.

Anastasia removed the I.V., easing the medical tape from his arm, careful not to rip out the hair. She was

so conscientious, he thought. Perfect blond angel.

"Have you. Ever tried it?" he said, with some effort.

"No," she said. "No, not yet."

"You should try it," he said to Anastasia. "You have to try it."

"I see all the people when they come out, some are crying. But mostly they are happy, they have a good experience. Did you have a good experience?"

"Oh, yes." Should he try to explain more? "Very good."

"So maybe I should try it."

"When's your birthday? Make him give you one for your birthday. The doctor."

"Next month, actually."

"O.K.," Harvey said. "It's settled. I'm getting you an infusion for your birthday."

She laughed, prettily. "Thank you."

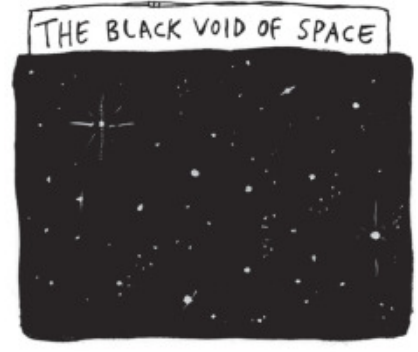
She was not even a little bit afraid of him.

"We'll just set you right up in bed," she was saying. "Let's just lie down for a bit, O.K.?"

He hoped that she never stopped telling him what to do, never stopped explaining what was coming next.

"Right, up we go, right on the bed. Now

NEW ZOOM BACKGROUNDS



a. c. 15

your legs. Swing them up for me. Very good."

Harvey lay on the bed.

"Are you gonna stay here?" he mumbled. "Stay with me?"

No response. When he opened his eyes, she was gone—he was alone.

Lunch in the dining room. Gabe pouring ice water from a carafe. A square of black cod, the size and thickness of a pack of cards. Charred broccolini. A scoop of bland white rice, flecked with parsley. He still felt dazed, his thoughts dropping a little bit behind. He wasn't hungry—a few halfhearted forkfuls of rice. He felt different from the person he had been that morning, like he'd stepped off to the side of himself. His phone buzzed on the tabletop—Rory, the lawyers. He let it go to voice mail. After a few moments, the phone shivered: they had left a message. He read the transcription, auto-generated by the phone, with one squinted eye:

"Chow had Lee it's roar a couple be back"

He didn't click to see the rest of the gibberish, letting his eyes close fully, his head resting on his folded arms.

Kristin texted—five minutes away. Some sense of duty, visiting her father in his hour of need. There had been no way to indicate that he would prefer to be alone, in order to more effectively tranquilize himself: he'd rather spend the day with Anastasia or hunker down in the peaceful bowels of the screening room, knocking himself out with endless episodes. Life was in many ways worse these days, but you had to admit: God had given people the tools they needed to be happy.

Kristin was his oldest daughter, unmarried with an A.D.D. kid, from designer sperm that had apparently not been so designer. Kristin ran a foundation aimed at improving graduation rates, and had signed a public pledge to give away at least half her wealth in her lifetime. Kristin, with her peculiar features, her downy cheeks. Kristin, who wrote an op-ed about choosing not to fly private anymore, for which she was roundly and deservedly mocked. She had never been able to see the wave coming, about to knock her down, though it was the clearest thing in the world.

Rory called again—Harvey answered.

"Just wanting to touch base," Rory was saying. "I don't want to alarm you, but I know we're just concerned, about Jurors 3 and 9, especially. We fought tooth and nail to keep them off, and with good reason, and the consultant thinks they could be the vocal ones in a closed room—"

A vague image of the women jurors appeared to him, the one with a spider pin on her lapel, the other in a silky shirt buttoned to the neck, a tight cornrowed bun on her head, always staring his way. In any other situation, he would have been aware of the women's existence for half a second. If that. He resented having to think about them at all. Which one of them had laughed when they'd shown the photos of his naked body? His arms and legs starfished in that well-lit room?

"Just want to keep you up to date on our thinking," Rory finished.

"Well," Harvey said. Should he ask him to repeat himself? "I guess," he said slowly, "I'm glad to be up to date. On your thinking."

A nap upstairs, and now the elevator glided soundlessly down to the ground floor, depositing him, the vulnerable human, safely at his destination. He padded toward the front door, one hand trailing lightly along the wall, in case he needed the support. Kristin was milling around the entry hall, Gabe fluttering in the background. She was in a turtleneck and a quilted vest. Silver earrings and pulled-back ponytail. Awfully severe. She looked sober and anxious, her daughter clutching her hand tightly, though she was eleven or twelve.

"Grandpa!" the girl said, when she caught sight of him approaching, hobbling down the hall.

For a moment, Harvey was taken aback, his chest warming with legit joy. She sounded so guileless, Ruby, so cheerful and wholesome. When he smiled at her, already the girl seemed uninterested. Was this an A.D.D. thing?

"Hello, you," Harvey said. He cleared his throat. He felt less groggy, less glitchy. "Hello, both of you."

"How are you, Dad?" Kristin said, hugging him with one arm.

"You know." He zipped and unzipped the half-zip of his sweater. "The bastards try to get you down." He blinked at the top of the girl's head. "Sorry. I mean the jerks."

Kristin patted his upper arm. "Well, we're here to get your spirits up. O.K.? We'll think positive."

He wished Gabe would just take over, like a cruise director, steer them toward the proper activities, keep them all energized and happy, maintain group morale, but Gabe had disappeared. "How was the drive?"

"Easy. Whatever."

"Boring," Ruby said. "How come there's an elevator in a house?"

"For people like me," he said, "people in pain. It's easier than the stairs."

Kristin's face rippled—who knows why?

"Are you hungry? Come in," he said. "Let's sit. Sit down at least—why are we just standing around?"

Gabe had put out silver bowls of potato chips, peanut M&M's. He appeared in the doorway to take their drink orders: Kristin wanted an espresso and a glass of seltzer, Ruby was already chewing the potato chips and shook her head.

"Water for me, too," Harvey said.

Ruby sat on the floor, leaned back against Kristin's legs. Kristin perched primly on the love seat, playing absently with Ruby's hair. It occurred to him that maybe she, too, was antsy, needed something to occupy herself.

"Having a good trip?" he said.

"We went to Ellis Island," Kristin said.

"You know, my grandparents are in the . . . book, register, whatever there. Did you see them? Find their names? Your great-grandparents. When they came from Warsaw."

"Uh, no. You didn't tell me that."

"You didn't tell me you were going."

A run of beeps from Ruby's phone, her head bowed in concentration.

"And," Kristin said, "we saw a matinee of 'Hamilton.'"

"I've seen it twice already," Ruby said. "This one wasn't even the original cast."

"That's true," Kristin said. "Her friend at school is the kid of—what's the guy, the guy from 'Cheers' who did that Broadway show a few years ago? They were living out here, for the run. Ruby visited for spring break."

Kristin looked at him expectantly, as if he would have follow-up questions. He folded his hands neatly on his stomach.

"How's your back?" she said.

"Better," he said. And it was true, since

BROOKLYN

In the late fall of 2006, I went out for what I knew would be my last night of drinking. I remember stopping at Kellogg's Diner to buy some Advil and a SlimFast, which I chugged on my way to the bar where I was meeting a girlfriend and a guy she was dating. There was something ceremonious about drinking that SlimFast, like putting on war paint. I thought it would protect my stomach from all the alcohol I was about to pour into it. I had never cared to do such a thing before.

The first few rounds of drinks were unremarkable, and I was bored with my girlfriend and her guy. Then we went to another bar, which I think was on Graham Avenue. I remember that the bartender was an old Polish woman who could see that I was up to no good. I had probably had ten drinks by then.

I turned to the man next to me. "Why do you smell so strongly of doughnuts?" was my opening line.

"I don't smell like doughnuts."

To me, he did. In fact, the whole bar smelled like doughnuts. "Am I hallucinating?" I asked the man.

"I don't care," he said.

"Let me buy you a drink," I told him. "Let me buy this whole bar a drink!" But I didn't. The bartender deliberately ignored me.

I was broke, sloppy, depressed, angry, bloated, desperate, and addicted. Apart from the SlimFast, this night, so far, was like any other night. Whether I was drinking at a bar or alone at home, self-centered dissatisfaction plagued me. I couldn't really get drunk anymore. I barely slept. I liked to drink sake instead of coffee in the mornings. Somehow I had held down a job, but I was always hung-over, cranky, and rude, insensitive to everything but my own bad mood.

It was probably already three in the morning when I left my friends on Graham to go and "get into some trouble."

The smell of doughnuts followed me. I figured my olfactory nerve was on the fritz, or maybe that SlimFast was working on me in mysterious ways. I wandered in and out of bars, looking for someone or something to turn the night into an adventure, but all I found were a few more drinks. I knew I had a bottle of vodka at my apartment. Maybe there was enough left to obliterate me. I kept thinking, If I can just drink enough tonight, I won't need to drink again for the rest of my life. I told myself, Go out with a bang.

I was impatient waiting for the subway at the Lorimer Street station. I don't know what the G train has been like since—I haven't taken it in a decade—but back then you could wait an hour for a train at night. I paced along the edge of the platform, peering into the tunnel for lights. The station was pretty empty. I was impatient to get home to that vodka. I kept leaning out over the tracks to look for the train coming. Darkness. It was driving me crazy to wait



so long. I kind of spaced out with my feet half over the edge of the platform, playing with my balance.

"Hello."

I turned and saw an angel. He was seven feet tall, wore brown pants and a blue puffy coat, and smiled as if the sight of me actually made him happy.

"Hi," I said.

I stepped toward him, away from the platform edge, right as the train arrived. I felt the breeze at my back. I understood that this man had appeared just in time to save my life.

The train doors opened. He went inside and gestured for me to follow him, as though he were a maître d'. He smiled continuously and sat a few seats away from me. I don't recall what we talked about during the ride, but I remember that he was very calm, very polite, asked me simple questions that I tried to answer without slurring. The doughnut smell was even more powerful at that point.

"I'm getting off here," he said, as the train pulled into the Myrtle-Willoughby station.

"Me, too." I lived a block and a half away.

It was still dark out, but I could feel the sun readying to break. The angel walked me to my door, quietly, dutifully, as if he had been sent there just to return me to safety.

Before I went inside, I asked him, "Do you smell doughnuts?"

He looked a little embarrassed, and laughed, and said, "I work the graveyard shift at Dunkin' Donuts."

I shook his hand and thanked him, went inside, and got into bed. In the morning, I poured out the vodka. ♦

the infusion he had felt less pain. Had mostly just been less aware of pain, had not returned to the fact of the pain at the end of every thought. "I'm trying this new therapy. New thing, very cutting edge. It was actually much better than the surgery. You should try it," Harvey said. "It's not just for, you know, pain."

How could he communicate what he had experienced earlier, how important it was that his daughter get an infusion as soon as possible? Maybe he could get Anastasia to come back this evening, get Kristin hooked up. Hell, even Ruby. All three of them zonked out in big easy chairs, drifting through space, attended to by a loyal blonde.

"And what about generally?" Kristin said. "Are you O.K.? Are you afraid?"

"Am I afraid?" He blinked, rapidly. "No, I'm not afraid." That's what he should try to make clear: how even though you felt, on the infusion, like you were floating through space and would never return to earth, it didn't scare you.

"I just," Kristin said. "I don't know. I'm here for you. I know Franny has not been the most supportive"—Frances, his other daughter, ensconced in Seattle with her bitchy tech husband; Frances, who sent him a lengthy e-mail, subject line "RAPE," and cc'd her shrink—"but you will always have me."

"Thanks. I don't think. I mean, I don't know but I don't think this is gonna go badly. You know? No one has given any indication that this is going to go sideways."

She didn't look entirely convinced. He suspected she thought that this scale of punishment made sense. It would have made him angry, usually—how could anyone believe he deserved this? Had he killed anyone? But that anger, so easily called forth, now seemed to exist on the other side of a pane of glass.

He pointed to where the roofline of the house next door was visible through the living-room window, the jag of black gables. "You know who lives over there?" he said. "In that brick house?" He paused, to summon the appropriate level of drama. "Don DeLillo."

Kristin seemed distracted, not quite listening. "The writer?"

"Yes. Yes, exactly, the writer. Pretty wild, huh, right next door to your Pops. We're actually doing a little project together, me and Don."

Hadn't Kristin majored in English? Shouldn't she look thrilled, instead of concerned?

"I'm gonna send you his books," Harvey announced. "Right now. For you, too, Ruby, a set for each of you." The gesture pleased him. He pulled up Amazon on his phone, squinting at the screen. "Now, let me just get this going," he said, pecking out letters in the search bar.

"Dad, I don't need all of Don DeLillo's books."

"Please, it's a pleasure. A gift."

"We're actually in the middle of decluttering right now," Kristin said.

"Nonsense," he said. "This is literature. Great literature. And maybe you'll want to help. I'm doing an adaptation of 'White Noise.' It's going to be big, sweetie. Huge. Maybe Ruby can intern on the set, like what's-her-face Obama. Would you like that, Ruby? See how a movie gets made?"

Ruby shot him a thumbs-up without looking over, enchanted by her phone.

"You have something in development?" Kristin sounded skeptical. "But where's the financing coming from? I thought Bob was—"

"Listen, sweetie. Everyone wants to get in on my next project. You know how many calls I get a day, people sniffing around to see where I'm headed after all this wraps up? What moves I'll make?"

Saying the words made him even more certain—they sounded true.

"But what if I don't know. You know, what if this doesn't go as you"—she seemed to be picking her words carefully, cognizant of Ruby at her feet—"as you planned?"

"Please. You think I'm going to jail? Look at me, I'm an old man."

An early dinner, a fire crackling pleasantly in the dining room. His appetite had returned, and he swabbed the steak juice from Vogel's embarrassing Wedgwood plate with a fat Parker House roll. Ruby ate plain spaghetti and an undressed salad. She drank ice water from a wine goblet. Kristin looked bored, ready to leave. Was it such a chore to spend time with him?

The clock in the kitchen was ticking so loudly he heard it from the dining room. Didn't Kristin notice? Didn't Ruby? Why were they all just sitting here eating as this steady tick marked every second?

"Gabe," Harvey said, clutching at the man's shirt as he refilled the Barolo. "Can we get that clock off, turn it off. Is it new? How come I hear every single tick?"

"Of course," Gabe said. "No problem. I'll take the batteries out right away."

Ruby watched this exchange with interest.

Harvey's phone kept buzzing on the table: texts of support. Last-minute exhortations from the lawyers, a request to RETURN MY CALL ASAP—he barely glanced at those. Some talk of bail, what to do if the judge denied their motion—"remanded," not a word he wanted to probe too hard. His eyes went soft, not exactly taking it in. Much better to focus on the other messages, the "Don't let this get you down" text, the "Soon this will all be in the rear-view!" e-mail.

"Look at this," Harvey said, turning the phone toward Kristin so she could see the latest lengthy text, a fat bubble of blue filling the screen. "Paulie says he'll take me out the minute this is all over. Said to pencil in Capri in August." Nice to imagine August on the boat, the dinner at the cliffs, the low votives along the table. Maybe Don DeLillo could join. Make a note to have Nancy overnight Don DeLillo a DVD of "Contempt."

"Great," Kristin said.

"What?" Harvey put his phone down. "Why do you say it like that, like it's bad?"

"It's just. I don't know if you should be, like, celebrating."

Ruby was eagle-eyed now, taking this in.

"Who's celebrating?" He gestured at the table, the staid windows segmenting the quickly darkening sky. "Is this a celebration, some wild party? I thought we were having a peaceful dinner? A quiet dinner with my daughter and granddaughter."

Kristin sighed, stared at her still full plate. "Sorry."

Another piece of steak, another Parker House roll. The green beans he grabbed with his fingers, everything speckled from the pepper mill wielded by Gabe. "Thank you," Harvey made a point of saying to Gabe. "Thank you," he repeated, to no one in particular.

Ruby gulped her ice water.

"You tired, sweetheart?" Kristin asked her. Ruby shrugged.

"She's getting tired," Kristin said. "We should think about going pretty soon."

"I'm not tired," Ruby said.

"It's a long drive back," Kristin said. "I don't love driving in the dark."

Harvey finished his wine. Tilting the empty glass back and forth. "What's the difference between the dark now and the dark in a few hours?" He had not meant it to sound accusatory—he really wondered.

"Dessert?" Gabe said, appearing in the doorway. "Angel-food cake and berries, or crème brûlée? We have sorbet."

"I'm full," Kristin said. "Sounds so yummy, though."

"Cake," Ruby said, scooting up on her chair. "And, like, what kind of sorbet do you have?"

"Gabe, bring out all the sorbets," Harvey said, "and one of everything else. My family is visiting. It's a special occasion."

"Really?" Ruby looked at Kristin, who smiled tightly. On the table, Harvey's phone buzzed.

Joan, the reporter, had sent a series of question marks. *If you really want to talk with me honestly, I think we should set up a chat tonight.*

Harvey turned his phone over.

"You could spend the night," Harvey said. "We could watch something, downstairs." To Ruby, "There's candy in the screening room. You can pick whatever. King size."

"She's already had a lot of sugar today."

"Skittles have horse hooves in them," Ruby said. "Sick, right?"

"It is sick." He nodded at the gloomy horse painting over the mantelpiece, jittery in the light of the candle. "You notice all these horses everywhere? It's, like, every room has a horse painting. I saw on the, you know, hand towels, too. A horse caricature."

"You mean silhouette," Kristin said.

Harvey shrugged. "You're probably right."

Ruby patted his hand, once, twice. The gesture moved him. It would be fun, having Ruby intern on the movie. He had a swift and detailed daydream: Don DeLillo writing Ruby a letter of recommendation for college, Ruby waving from the dais of her graduation, beaming love at Harvey. But be-



"It may make me look dumb, but it's technically just as dangerous as a motorcycle."

fore he could respond, maybe even take Ruby's hand in his, Kristin had pushed her chair back, was gathering up her purse, folding her soiled napkin. "We should hit the road," she said.

"Are you sure you don't want to sleep over? There's so many rooms. You can ride the elevator."

Kristin smiled, sadly.

"Tea? Coffee? Anything? Let me call Gabe," he said. But their departure was already set in motion. Pretty soon he would be waving at their car as they pulled away and left him alone, and then that was exactly what he was doing. He lingered outside in the driveway, the barn jacket zipped up, his bare head cold, his nostrils sharpening with frigid air. The house next door, the house of

Don DeLillo, was silent, all the windows black. No car in the driveway, no signs of life. Where had he gone, Don DeLillo?

Upstairs, Gabe had laid out his clothes for the morning: The suit hanging from the closet door. The red socks draped alongside the butter-scotch split-toe bluchers. The walker probably folded and waiting by the door downstairs.

He sat on the closed lid of the toilet, waiting for the bath to fill. The ankle bracelet was waterproof, fine to wear in the shower, but he'd thought, at first, that he had to keep it dry, so he'd started taking baths. And now he preferred baths, liked feeling like a tea



"According to this, couples who read in bed together are happier. It doesn't say anything about the harmonica."

bag, steeping in the scalding water.

Around his body, the bathwater was cloudy with soap, tepid water he drained and refilled with more hot water. His phone and a heavy tumbler of Scotch on the porcelain ledge, the Scotch not exactly condoned by his doctors. But Gabe seemed to understand this was a special night, a night that deserved kindness. The pour had been especially generous. Harvey slipped the soap under each armpit, around the belly, the groin that he didn't quite acknowledge, a habit from childhood, hitting the area with soap but never looking at his body, his gaze focussing somewhere beyond. Then his legs, his knees poking out of the water like two bald monks. The soap shot out from his fist—he groped for it in the opaque water, then gave up.

A knock on the door—Gabe. "I'm just going to close up the house for the night," he said. "I left a sleeping pill on the nightstand with a fresh bottle of water. Can I get you anything else for now?"

"Thanks," Harvey called in the direction of the closed door. "Nothing. Thanks."

Another missed call from Rory. Forget Rory. He should get in touch

with Joan. She had always helped him.

"Harvey," Joan said. She sounded weary. "I don't have time to do anything before tomorrow. You should get some sleep."

"Listen, listen. Just stay with me, O.K.?" Joan? You know me. You've known me for years. I'm not a monster. You know I'm not a monster."

He'd worked hard, hadn't he? Bought his mother a house. Let Nancy's M.S. boyfriend piggyback on her health insurance. "You can tell the truth from the lies, can't you, Joan?"

"Harvey." Was she just going to keep repeating his name in that doomed register? Why was she acting like it was already over, like he'd already been convicted? His heart beat rapidly. He clutched the phone harder to his ear with wet hands. "Joan. I remember things, too, Joan. Remember that girl in Tokyo? Gold Bar," he said, triumphantly. "Gold Bar. You left her there. She was crying and you left her there. Remember that, Joan?"

"Jesus, Harvey."

"So you do remember?"

"What is this? Are you threatening me?" Her voice was a monotone, a professional monotone.

"No, no," he said, "not threatening, just—"

"Don't you dare threaten me, Harvey. Do not. Fucking. Dare."

He had never heard her sound like that. Her tone so careful, clipped. Like she was talking to someone doomed. A new and sudden panic was seizing him, a freezing bite at the nape of his neck, as if he'd been taken in the jaws of a terrible animal.

Perhaps a resolution would not be as clean as he'd assumed, not be as swift and total. All the things that had happened he could barely remember, so that at first he'd actually listened with some interest to the testimony, curious to hear what he'd supposedly done. But it had quickly become boring. He assumed everyone had felt the same way, assumed everyone was similarly bored. It had all seemed to occur at the wrong end of a telescope, far away and distorted—tales set in hotel rooms, hallways of restaurants that had closed almost a decade ago. Bar 89 no longer existed. The girl was saying he had called her once from his cell phone, told her he was standing out in front of Lady M and did she think it was totally naughty if he went inside and got a cake?

This made him look up—had he said that?

As the trial had gone on, Harvey found himself fuzzing out, daydreaming, filling and refilling his water glass just to have something to do. The other girl said he had wanted to film her. Made her pose for him.

"And did you pose for him?"

She nodded through tears. He glanced at the jury—no one seemed too distressed. Rory hadn't made eye contact with him, but Harvey could tell, by a slight upturn of his lips, that he, too, thought this was ridiculous.

"Did he invite you to parties?" the lawyer said. "And you attended, even after this incident?"

The girl looked at her hands. "I like parties," she said. "Everyone likes parties."

The trial could have ended right there.

"Joan," Harvey said. "Wait."

But it was over. He had lost her. "Goodbye, Harvey."

He called back. Once. Twice. Five times. The calls went straight to voice mail.

Gabe had turned down the bedcovers, dimmed the lights. Drawn all the curtains. Another slug of Scotch. Pajama pants drawstringed at his waist, a purple Lakers T-shirt he found in Vogel's top drawer. Fuzzy socks with snowflakes on them, white wool and ice blue, his pajama pants tucked into the top. Cozy, cozy. He could, at this moment, meet every one of his needs: always be warm, always be fed. What if that changed? Unbearable, unthinkable. Who knows how long he sat there in the dim room? How long until a sound outside broke the spell?

Harvey made his way to the window, and pulled back the curtain. The noise was coming from the house next door, Don DeLillo's house—it was his car, Don DeLillo's car, popping along the gravel, coming to a stop in front of the house. The car's interior lights turned on, bright enough that Harvey saw the outline of Don DeLillo in the driver's seat. He seemed to be sitting very still, sitting very upright. Was he waiting for Harvey to join him? Waiting for their midnight meeting, there in the quiet countryside? An assignation amid its sleeping citizens, dreaming in their beds, unaware of Harvey and Don DeLillo vibrating on a higher frequency? Why else would Don DeLillo just be sitting there, the dome light like a beacon, summoning Harvey?

Harvey shrugged on the barn jacket, a beanie with earflaps that he grabbed from a basket of gloves and hats in the entry closet. A horse appliqué on the hat, hovering right over his brow.

One great yank and the front door was open—except the world was ending, an earsplitting, pants-shitting sound ripping through the silence. An alarm—he was in danger! Or, actually, he was the danger—he'd set off some security system, but no time to explain to Gabe. He strode out into the brisk night. A night, he noted, of no stars, a poetic observation, one he would share with Don DeLillo. The alarm continued its steady bleat, the volume seeming to increase. The covered patio furniture hulked in shadowy arrangement—he glided

around it, heading toward the fence. He was moving fluidly, moving without any pain. The car came in and out of sight, the interior light still on, the beacon guiding his way.

Here was the fence, and there, on the other side, was Don DeLillo. He was still sitting in the car—talking on the phone, Harvey could see now, a rectangle of light casting Don DeLillo's face in sickly blue. The radio was on, or music was playing, the chatter drifting through the night, in the intermittent silence of the alarm. Harvey started to wave. Don DeLillo would know what to do. How to fix the things that had gone wrong. The alarm behind him *was* louder, he wasn't imagining it. Don DeLillo had noticed, too, his head cocked, his face turning in Harvey's direction.

"It's me," Harvey called out, raising his hand, waving, hoping to be seen in the darkness. "I'm here."

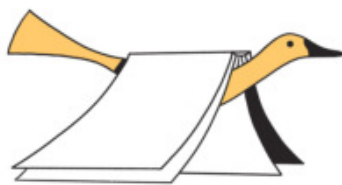
Don DeLillo was unfolding himself from the car, standing with one hand cupped over his eyes—but why? There was no sun.

"Hello," Harvey said, and Don DeLillo paused, the driver's door ajar.

Harvey was pressed right up against the fence now, the slats coming to his chin, only his head poking over, like a gargoyle. "Good evening," Harvey yelled, in a rush. His hands were gripping the fence slats, which were, for some reason, damp. His loafers were soaked.

"Is everything O.K.?" Don DeLillo called.

"I just want to talk," Harvey said, "if you have a minute? Just a quick"—he



rocked on his toes, his mind grasping for the word—"a quick chat."

"Hold on, I'll call you back," Don DeLillo said into the phone, then shut the car door, making his slow way on the gravel toward Harvey. He was coming closer. Every step was audible, an icy crunch.

"Are you all right?" Don DeLillo

said, near enough now for Harvey to make out his face above his scarf, a face mooning out of the darkness—his eyes were wet berries.

"I'm fine," Harvey said. "And you?"

"The alarm?" Don DeLillo gestured behind Harvey.

"Oh, yes." He made as if to glance back at the house, then actually did. The house was all lit up, a birthday cake hovering in the void. "I forgot the, uh. Security code."

"Right."

"I saw your light," Harvey said, trying to be crystal clear, to communicate, with every word he spoke, that he had received the message. "I saw you were awake, too. Both of us," Harvey said, with significance, "*couldn't sleep*."

Didn't Don DeLillo see how alike they were, didn't he feel it? See how they were men, both of them, men up late on this dark winter night, pondering what the new day would bring?

Don DeLillo was studying Harvey, his face turned to the side. His brows bloomed on his old gray face.

"Maybe," Don DeLillo said, slowly, "maybe you just needed some fresh air. Sometimes that helps me. When I can't sleep."

"Yes," Harvey said, beaming. "That's exactly right. We both needed some air."

His fingers were freezing, almost numb. But his back didn't hurt, not at all. His nose was runny but he didn't make to wipe it. He tasted salt in his smile. "Don't worry," Harvey said, almost whispering. "I'm not gonna make a scene, or turn this into a big deal. I just," he said, "want you to know. It's an honor to meet you."

Don DeLillo looked bewildered.

"Do you want me to call someone?" Don DeLillo said.

Don DeLillo was close enough that Harvey could touch him, if he tried, if he made an effort. Did he reach out first, or did Don DeLillo back up, his arms flapping a little, his phone clutched to his chest? Why did he look confused? There was so much Harvey wanted to tell him—they had so much to decide. But there was time, he reminded himself. There was all the time in the world. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Emma Cline on fictionalizing odious men.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

BIGGER THINGS TO HIDE BEHIND

Andy Warhol and the reign of Pop.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Andy Warhol's life may be better documented than that of any other artist in the history of the world. That is because, every few days or so, he would sweep all the stuff on his desk into a storage box, date it, label it "TC"—short for "time capsule"—and then store it, with all the preceding TCs, in a special place in his studio. As a result, we have his movie-ticket stubs, his newspaper clippings, his cowboy boots, his wigs, his collection of dental molds, his collection of pornography, the countless Polaroids he took of the people at the countless parties he went to—you name it. We have copies of bills he sent and also of bills he received from increasingly exasperated creditors, including one ("PAY UP YOU BLOWHARD") from Giuseppe Rossi, the doctor who, in 1968, saved his life after a woman who felt she had been insufficiently featured in his movies came to his studio one day and shot him. In one box, I've heard, there is also a slice of cake, on a plate. It wasn't just material objects he kept. When possible, he taped his phone conversations, and sometimes had an assistant type them up. He believed in the power of the banal. This faith was the well-spring of the Pop-art paintings—the Campbell's soup cans, the Brillo cartons—that made him famous in the nineteen-sixties and changed America's taste in art.

After Warhol's death, in 1987, a museum dedicated to his work was established in his home town, Pittsburgh. The time capsules—six hundred and ten of them—were shipped there and

lined up on banks of metal shelving, ready for the person who would work their contents into a fittingly rich biography. Seven years ago, he arrived: Blake Gopnik, formerly the lead art critic of the *Washington Post*. (His brother, Adam, is a writer for this magazine.) Gopnik is fantastically thorough; the book is nine hundred pages long—not counting the seven thousand endnotes, available in the e-book edition or online. But you don't lose heart, because Gopnik is a vivid chronicler. Here is a small clip from his description of the repair job Dr. Rossi did on Warhol's innards after the 1968 shooting. The surgeon found

two holes in the arc of the diaphragm muscle, pierced both right and left as the bullet crossed through Warhol's body; an esophagus severed from the stomach, so that food and gastric acid were spilling out from below; a liver whose left lobe was mashed and bleeding and a spleen utterly destroyed and spilling more blood than any of the other organs. [The] bullet had also cut a ragged hole in Warhol's intestines, releasing feces and upping the chances of fatal infection.

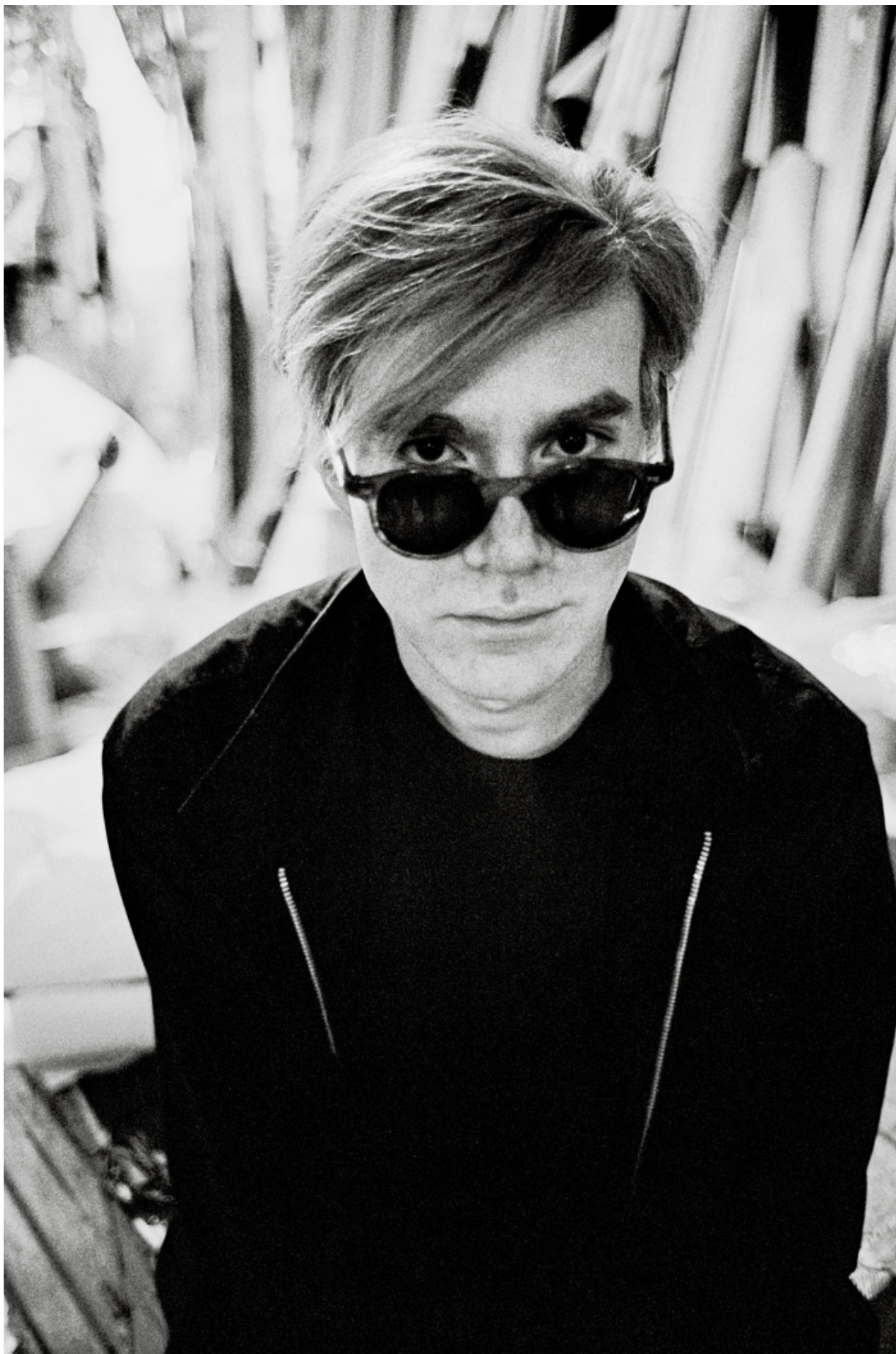
Reading this, I felt as though I were having the operation myself.

Warhol was born in Pittsburgh in 1928, the youngest of the three sons of Andrej and Julia Warhola, who had immigrated to the United States from a small village in what is now Slovakia. The townsfolk were Carpatho-Rusyns, a Slavic people, and the family was Byzantine Catholic. (Warhol, as an adult, sporadically went to Mass. "Church is a fun place to go," he said.) Slavs were much in demand in Pittsburgh, with its

steel mills, because they were reputedly willing to do any kind of work, at any wage. As a result, they were also the most looked-down-upon ethnic group in the city. Andrej was a manual laborer; Julia a domestic. When she didn't have enough work, she went door to door, often with her sons in tow, selling decorative flowers made from cut-up peach cans. Andrej died in 1942. The two older boys quit school and took full-time jobs. Andy stayed in school. For most of his youth, he was cosseted by his family. When the Warhols acquired a new Baby Brownie Special camera (\$1.25), he immediately laid hands on it, and never let it go. His brothers built him a darkroom in the basement. Also, he fell in love with the movies; he said that he wanted to make his living showing films. This was an unusual life plan for a boy of his background, but Julia saved nine dollars—nine days' wages from her housecleaning—to buy him a projector. He showed Mickey Mouse cartoons on a wall in the apartment.

Warhol liked to describe himself as self-educated, a widely accepted claim. In fact, he went to an excellent art college, the Carnegie Institute of Technology, where a number of his teachers recognized his gifts and kept the work that he turned in to them, a rare tribute. The minute he got out of school, in 1949, he packed his belongings in a paper bag and got on an overnight Greyhound bound for New York City. He was twenty.

Warhol lived in a series of roach-ridden sublets, usually shares, while trying to break into commercial illustration. Once, when he was showing samples



COURTESY 303 GALLERY; OPPOSITE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

Warhol would tell interviewers to talk to his assistant: "He did a lot of my paintings."

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN SHORE



DUE TO NAVIGATIONAL ERROR, TINY INTERPLANETARY PROBE MAKES UNINTENDED DETOUR INTO MRS. MCGINTY'S POTATO SALAD

of his work to the editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*, an insect crawled out of his portfolio, to his mortification. The editor felt so sorry for him that she gave him an assignment. Warhol was not shy. In the Museum of Modern Art, he went up to a staffer and proposed that he design Christmas cards for the gift shop. (He got the job.) A friend remembered seeing him in a bookstore, flipping through the record bins to see which labels were doing the most interesting jackets. Then he went home and cold-called the art directors. "He was like a little Czech tank," another friend said.

Many people who met him in those years, and later, found him strange—a "weird little creep," in the words of one. He was unabashedly homosexual, and in the early fifties that was weird enough. He liked to do drawings of nude boys, their nipples and crotches dotted with little hearts, like soft kisses. If he met a man who appealed to him, he might say that he liked to photograph penises, and would this man mind? "No, of course not," one self-possessed British curator replied. "What are you going to use them for?" "Oh, I don't know yet," Warhol said. "I'm just tak-

ing the pictures." The man unzipped.

Three years after Warhol arrived in New York, his mother turned up on his doorstep. She explained to one of his friends, "I come here to take care of my Andy, and when he's okay I go home." She stayed for almost twenty years. The household had a large, smelly collection of Siamese cats. At one point, there were reportedly seventeen of them, mostly named Sam. (But Julia, pointing, could introduce them separately: "That's the good Sam, that's the bad Sam, that's the dumb Sam...") Between the cats and Julia's late-life drinking problem, Warhol seems to have been hesitant to introduce her to his friends. On the other hand, one boyfriend said he thought Warhol was grateful for her presence, because it gave him an excuse not to have sex. He would explain to his guest that he didn't want to make any bedroom noises as long as his mother was within earshot.

Warhol claimed that he was a virgin until he was twenty-five, and some people would say that that was no surprise. All his life, he was pained by his looks. He was cursed with terrible skin, not just acne but what seems to have been a disorder of pigment distribu-

tion, so that his complexion was lighter here, darker there. He also had a bulbous nose, or so he thought, and he got a nose job. By the time he was in his thirties, he had lost much of his hair. Thereafter, he glued a toupee to his scalp every morning. His most celebrated wig was a silver one, which he usually wore with a fringe of his brown hair peeping out at the neck. These difficulties boded ill for his sex life, and he was widely said to be lousy in bed. He thought sex was "messy and distasteful," a friend reported. He'd do it with you once or twice, and that was it. Gopnik, as is his practice, also gives competing evidence: "Within a few years Warhol was having surgery for anal warts and a tear, and a decade later he was taking penicillin for a venereal disease." Warhol's friend and collaborator Taylor Mead said that Warhol "blows like crazy."

Warhol lied constantly, almost recreationally. He lied about his age even to his doctor. He told *Who's Who* that he was born in Cleveland, to the "von Warhol" family. (He had traded in Warhola for Warhol soon after arriving in New York.) He adopted a gentle, whispery voice, into which he might then drop a little grenade. If someone asked how he was, he might say, "I'm okay," and then, coming closer, he would add, "But I have diarrhea." Some people thought he was stupid. Not those who knew him well. "Warhol only plays dumb," a friend said. "He's incredibly analytical, intellectual, and perceptive."

His commercial specialty was drawings for women's-wear ads—above all, shoes. In 1955, the high-end women's shoemaker I. Miller gave him a contract for a minimum of twelve thousand dollars' worth of work per year, a lot of money at the time. He also did window dressing, notably for Bonwit Teller. But already he was looking beyond this: he wanted to be a gallery artist. Teachers and classmates from Carnegie Tech provided some connections, and Manhattan's gay community supplied more. He also had a few special godfathers, attracted to him, it seems, by his charm (not everybody thought he was creepy) and by his drive. Perhaps his most important guide was

Emile de Antonio, an artists' agent, who introduced him all around; he knew John Cage, whom Warhol revered, and lots of collectors. ("I gave a little party for a terribly rich woman I knew," de Antonio recalled, "and I served just marijuana and Dom Perignon, and Andy did a beautiful menu in French.") Another useful person was Ivan Karp, the director of the Leo Castelli Gallery, Manhattan's most prestigious art mart. Through Karp, Warhol eventually met Henry Geldzahler, a curatorial assistant at the Metropolitan Museum, whose job there was to find out who the hot new artists were and tell the curators.

In the fifties, the United States already had a pocket of conceptual art, but the star painters were the Abstract Expressionists, above all Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, with their effortful drips and impastos. At the Ab Exes' heels were the young Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, part conceptual, part painterly, and edging into "Pop," a style that used imagery from mass culture—comic strips, movies, advertising—and adopted a light, playful tone, the very opposite of the Abstract Expressionists' heavy lifting. Warhol, too, was interested in this popular matter and manner, and he was annoyed that other people were, as he saw it, stealing a march on him. According to a famous story, he was complaining about this to friends one night and asked if anyone could think of pop-culture images that no one else had used. A decorator named Muriel Latow said she had a suggestion, but she wanted fifty dollars, up front, before she would reveal it. The unembarrassable Warhol sat down and wrote a check. Then Latow said, "You've got to find something that's recognizable to almost everybody... something like a can of Campbell's Soup."

Gopnik calls this Warhol's "eureka moment," and it is typical of the book's sophistication that the crucial, seedling idea of Warhol's Pop art should be attributed, without apology, to someone other than Warhol. Often, artists who are praised for birthing a new trend are not the actual originators but the ones who made the trend appealing to a large public. Warhol had as much of the latter gift as of the for-

mer; Gopnik calls him "the Great Sponge." In any case, the day after Latow shared with him her little brain bomb, Warhol (or his mother, in another version) went to the Finast supermarket across the street and came home with one can of every kind of Campbell's soup on sale there. By the following year, 1962, he had produced "Campbell's Soup Cans," a montage of all thirty-two varieties. Today, this painting hangs in the Museum of Modern Art—"the 'Nude Descending a Staircase' of the Pop movement," in the words of Henry Geldzahler. It is both a slap in the face and a great joy: so fresh, so brash, so red and white, so certain that it has covered every kind of soup in the world, from Pepper Pot to Scotch Broth.

In rapid succession, the Campbell's Soups were followed by Warhol's other now famous Pop paintings: "Green Coca-Cola Bottles" (1962), "192 One Dollar Bills" (1962), "Brillo Soap Pads Box" (1964), the Marilyn Monroes and Elizabeth Taylors and Marlon Brandos and Elvises. For some, you can easily construct a background narrative. The "Marilyn Diptych," comprising fifty silk screens of Monroe, fading from garish color to spectral black-and-white, was exhibited just after her death. But I see no story lurking behind the Liz Taylors or the Elvises or, for that matter, the panels of twenty-four Statues of Liberty (1962) or thirty



Mona Lisas (1963). All of these ladies, not to speak of Elvis and Brando, were stars, and Warhol, from his childhood until the day he died, was enthralled by celebrity.

He soon became a celebrity himself, if an unusual one. In his thirties, he was famous, in TV interviews, for putting two fingers over his lips and saying things like "er" or "um," but not much more, as the cameras rolled. (You can see this on YouTube. It is discom-

forting to watch.) For live interviews, he would often bring along Gerard Malanga, who worked with him, and say, "Why don't you ask my assistant Gerry Malanga some questions? He did a lot of my paintings." There was some truth to this. Of the works listed above, all but the 1962 "Campbell's Soup Cans" were silk screens, usually based on photographs that someone else had taken, and made with Malanga wielding the squeegee. From 1963 to 1972—the period during which he made most of his Pop art—Warhol produced no hand-drawn work.

Running parallel to Warhol's iconoclasm about authorship was a certain coolness toward his subjects. "For an artist with a lifelong reputation for sucking up to stars," Gopnik writes, "Warhol also had a lifelong knack for making art that underlined their shortcomings and hollowness." Probably the most important discussions of Warhol's work are the books and essays that the philosopher Arthur Danto wrote on him from the mid-sixties onward. These are not exactly art criticism. Their scope is broader. Danto says that Warhol's work, by disposing of modernism's assertions that painting should be about the nature of painting, liberated it to go its own way, while the art critics stayed back in the schoolroom, arguing. Danto doesn't say he loved Warhol's work, but I think he did. I'm sorry that he liked the Brillo carton—it supplied the title of his book "Beyond the Brillo Box"—better than the Campbell's soup cans, but he probably enjoyed the irony that the Brillo box Warhol immortalized was designed by an Abstract Expressionist painter, James Harvey, doing a money job on the side. The Ab Exes looked upon Warhol with hatred. At a party in the late sixties, a drunken de Kooning said to Warhol, "You're a killer of art, you're a killer of beauty, you're even a killer of laughter."

Warhol didn't kill laughter—he would have been less famous if he had done so—but his humor is muted, deadpan. In 1964, he produced a series of nine silk screens of Jacqueline Kennedy's face, based on press photos: one that showed her in the famous pillbox hat, just before J.F.K. was shot; the second as Lyndon Johnson was being sworn in, on the

airplane back to Washington; the third at Kennedy's funeral. There was nothing overtly mocking about these works. But in 1964, when, in the public mind, Kennedy's body was not yet cold, they raised a question: What was Warhol saying? Viewers might have asked the same of his earlier "Death and Disasters" series (1962-65), worked up from photographs of bloodied corpses hanging out of wrecked cars, mangled bodies of people who had jumped to their deaths, the electric chair in which Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, convicted of spying for the Soviet Union, were executed, and so on. Like the soup cans, the silk screens were often cheerfully multiplied and, like the Marilyn's and the Liz Taylors, covered with washes of bright color: blue, red, violet, yellow.

In the same year as the "Nine Jackies," Warhol unveiled silk screens of his "Flowers," big, blobby hibiscus blossoms against a grassy field. They looked like wallpaper or, as Gopnik suggests, Marimekko dress fabrics. In any case, they were something that, unlike a picture of an electric chair, you might be willing to hang over your living-room sofa. This was what they were apparently designed for, because Warhol (or Malanga) turned out more than four hundred and fifty of them, in different versions—different sizes, different colorways, to use Gopnik's inspired word—and they sold like hotcakes. Warhol claimed to be proud of them. If I'm not mistaken, Gopnik doesn't believe him. He quotes Warhol announcing, the following year, that he has retired as an artist. The "Flowers," Gopnik writes, were "pretty much his last notable Pop paintings." But, as the author does not flat-out say but repeatedly implies, they were also pretty much Warhol's last notable paintings, period. "I hate paintings," he told a reporter in 1966, adding, "That's why I started making movies."

He had made his first film in 1963. Titled "Sleep," it was five and a half hours long, and all it showed was his boyfriend, John Giorno, sleeping. The next year, he followed this up with "Empire," eight hours, overnight, of the Empire State Building, shot from a

window in the nearby Time-Life Building. Thereafter, until the mid-seventies, he made scores of movies, some of them pure and severe, like "Sleep" and "Empire," and others, such as "The Chelsea Girls" and "Lonesome Cowboys," shambling and funny and dirty, with drag queens sitting around licking bananas or people having dilatory conversations about sex, or having sex.

But the movies were not just movies. They were the motion-picture wing of what was by now a whole "scene." In 1964, Warhol moved his professional headquarters into a vast space he came to call the Factory—it had housed a hat factory before he moved in—on East Forty-seventh Street, just west of the United Nations. The place was filthy, but Warhol's friend

Billy Name (né Billy Linich, but Linich was a name, right? So why not just go by Name?) moved in with a pack of fellow speed freaks and transformed the space with tinfoil and spray paint, so that in the end every surface was silver.

Just as Warhol's movies were not merely movies, the Factory was not merely a place where things were made. It was also a showcase for a certain group of people who clustered around Warhol. Billy Name was one; Gerard Malanga another. Also important was Ondine (Robert Olivo), wild and vicious. Best known to outsiders was Edie Sedgwick, a sweet-faced and rather hapless rich girl who, in black tights and expensive sweaters, often went along on Warhol's outings, as his "date," and paid the tab. These and a few others were Warhol's superstars, as he called them.

In 1966, he also became the manager of a proto-punk rock band, the Velvet Underground, hatchery of Lou Reed, John Cale, and others, all pretty much unknown at that point. One of its members described a typical show: "Some sailors or something were in the audience of five, and we played something and they said, 'You play that again and we'll fuck the shit out of you.' So we played it again." "Our aim was to upset people," one of the band's founders said, "make them vomit." Warhol knew little about music, and he and

the Velvets broke up in less than a year. ("Always leave them wanting less," Warhol said.) But for a while Warhol's film showings and performances—notably, "The Exploding Plastic Inevitable" and "★★★★"—were multimedia events, featuring the superstars bopping around in a desultory fashion to the Velvets' discordant strains while two or more films were projected side by side or, indeed, in superimposition.

It hardly needs to be said that drugs were involved here, and this fact, augmented with reminiscences of Warhol's associates, has contributed to a portrait of him as a sort of Mephistopheles, luring his young friends to their ruin. A key story is that of Freddy Herko, part of the West Village postmodern-dance scene in the sixties. One day, a while after he had stopped hanging around the Factory, Herko took a bubble bath, and some LSD, at a friend's apartment, danced naked for a while, and then, to the strains of Mozart's "Coronation Mass," threw himself out a window. When informed of Herko's death, Warhol commented that he was sorry not to have been there to film the fall.

This story won him an enduring reputation, with those so minded, as an emotionless person, a sort of freak—an image reinforced by his paintings of soup cans and electric chairs. Cold heart, cold art. Gopnik doesn't say whether or not he believes the report, but he concludes that, if it is true, it says as much about Warhol's desire to shock as about his supposed lack of feeling. He also points out that Warhol used the joke more than once. When his relationship with Edie Sedgwick was coming to an end—she ran off with Bob Dylan—he said to a friend, "When do you think Edie will commit suicide? I hope she lets us know, so we can film it." If this was nasty, it was also clear-eyed: six years later, Sedgwick died of a barbiturate overdose. Warhol also applied the joke to himself, saying that he always regretted that no one had been there, in 1968, to film him being gunned down.

On June 3, 1968, Valerie Solanas emerged from the elevator at the Factory. She was a local eccentric, the founder and sole member of a feminist organization she called SCUM, the



Society for Cutting Up Men. She was also, apparently, suffering from an acute mental disorder. She had previously drifted into Warhol's studio a few times and he had put her in a sexploitation film, "I, a Man," in 1967. She felt he should have used her more, and this was the reason for her visit. Entering the studio, she fired several times at Warhol and also put a bullet in a friend of his who was visiting. Then she turned around and stepped back into the elevator. A few hours later, in Times Square, she told a bewildered cop, "The police are looking for me. I am a flower child. He had too much control over my life." (She got three years. "You get more for stealing a car," Lou Reed said.) Meanwhile, an ambulance had taken Warhol to Columbus Hospital, where he was laid out on a table for Dr. Rossi's ministrations. His mother, summoned by one of his associates, stood in the lobby, praying for her "good, religious boy." The doctors had her sedated and taken home. After the surgery, Warhol stayed in the hospital for two months, eating candy, talking on the phone, and trying to manage the studio from afar.

Gopnik describes the assault by Solanas as the dividing line between Warhol's "before" and his "after." He slowly got rid of his disreputable entourage, or they, feeling less valued, left him. He acquired fancier friends, like Lee Radziwill and Mick Jagger. He bought an estate in Montauk, and a chocolate-brown Rolls to go with it. In 1969, he founded *Interview*, a publication that was advertised as being devoted to movies (the original title was *inter/VIEW: A Monthly Film Journal*) but soon became a magazine about celebrities. Apparently, he did not often work on it—one of the early editors said he never read it until the printer delivered it—but it helped to snag clients for another department of his activities, the manufacture of silk-screen portraits of friends, patrons, and assorted big names: Dennis Hopper, Dominique de Menil, Gianni Versace, the Shah of Iran, Chris Evert, Dolly Parton, Imelda Marcos.

Seeing Warhol's brush with death as a watershed has obvious narrative appeal, but, on the evidence of Gop-

nik's chronicle, the "after" had been coming for a while. Like most of Warhol's Pop paintings, the great majority of his films were made in less than five years. Then, it seems, he got bored. He fielded a few works in the I-dare-you-to-say-this-isn't-art manner of his hero and friend Marcel Duchamp, who, by exhibiting a signed urinal, in 1917, more or less invented conceptual art. In 1972, at Finch College, in New York, Warhol did his "vacuum-cleaner piece," which involved his vacuuming a patch of carpet in the college's art gallery, signing the dust bag, propping it on a pedestal, and going home. But, as Gopnik points out, "Where Duchamp's urinal had involved a transformation of the banal into art, if only by the artist's say-so, Warhol's update involved jettisoning transformation altogether so that banality itself, left to do its banal thing, could count as high art."

Some years before, Warhol had placed an ad in the *Village Voice*: "I'll endorse with my name any of the following; clothing AC-DC, cigarettes small, tapes, sound equipment, ROCK N' ROLL RECORDS, anything, film, and film equipment, Food, Helium, Whips, MONEY!! love and kisses Andy Warhol, EL 5-9941." This comically blatant announcement—the phone number

was Warhol's real office number—can't seriously have been intended to bring in cash. Rather, it proclaimed that, henceforward, "selling out" would be, for Warhol, an aesthetic move.

But gradually the sellout pose stuck. When, two years later, Warhol told a reporter that his artistic medium was "business," he meant it. In Gopnik's words, this declaration "launched a new approach to his life and his art that would mold both for the following two decades, and then shape his reputation for all the years afterward." Reverting to his I. Miller days, he began designing ads: a sundae for Schrafft's, a limited-edition bottle for Absolut vodka, and the like. He also had an idea for a chain of Andy-Mat diners. "They're for people who eat alone," he explained. "You sit at a little table, order up any sort of frozen food you want, and watch TV at the same time. Everyone has his own TV set."

Warhol's new enterprises didn't take up much of his time. Gopnik says that the artist gave maybe two days each to the later silk-screen portraits—and that it showed. "Ever more vacant," Gopnik calls these paintings. Unsurprisingly, Warhol's star fell. By the time, in the early eighties, that he began doing collaborative paintings



"Let me just check my e-mail, my texts, my missed calls, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, my credit score, my horoscope, the results of this latest personality test, the S. & P., the Dow, the news, this article about cute dogs, and the weather, and then we can go."

with Jean-Michel Basquiat—Gopnik guesses that the young prodigy reminded the older man of his earlier self—the association was enough to damage Basquiat's reputation. A critic for the *Times* wrote that their work together looked “like one of Warhol's manipulations, which increasingly seem based on the Mencken theory about nobody going broke underestimating the public's intelligence. Basquiat, meanwhile, comes across as the all too willing accessory.” Basquiat soon distanced himself, which hurt Warhol. Gopnik feels, too, that Warhol was not as indifferent to artistic quality as he made himself out to be. Soon after the Centre Pompidou, in Paris, opened, Warhol spent a day looking at its modern-art masterworks and wrote in his diary, “I wanted to just rush home and paint and stop doing society portraits.”

Still, many rich people were happy to have him do portraits of them. This third arm of his empire fell into a neat synergy with the others—the fancy Montauk house, the celebrity magazine—and made him a lot of money. He enjoyed spending it. He liked to buy loose diamonds and walk around jiggling them in his pocket. In his later years, he went antique shopping most mornings and eventually bought around a million dollars' worth of heirloom furniture. He had no space for most of it in his living quarters and therefore had to stash it in empty rooms upstairs.

Warhol once tried to give an old friend one of his Marilyn Monroe silk screens, and the man, who disliked Pop, said, “Just tell me in your heart of hearts that you know it isn't art.” Warhol, imperturbable, answered, “Wrap it up in brown paper, put it in the back of a closet—one day it will be worth a million dollars.” He was right, Gopnik says, but off by two orders of magnitude: in 2008, a Warhol silk screen sold for a hundred million dollars. There was no huger reputation than Warhol's in the art of the sixties, and in late-twentieth-century art there was no more important decade than the sixties. Much of the art that has followed, in the United States, is unthinkable without him,

without his joining of high culture and low, without his love of sizzle and flash, without his combination of tenderness and sarcasm, without the use of photography and silk-screening and advertising.

If any artist of the past half century deserves a biography as detailed as this one, then, it is Warhol. Still, the long tail end of Warhol's career forces Gopnik into some tight corners as a critic. He acknowledges that, even by the end of the sixties, Warhol was treading water as an artist. I believe that's true, and that Gopnik thinks so, too. Yet elsewhere, and often, he tries to defend Warhol against the charge of having made inferior work in the seventies and eighties. Most frustrating are the instances when he excuses mediocre paintings by saying that mediocrity was what Warhol was going for, and that we should congratulate him for having achieved his goal.

At times, the defenses reminded me of the philosopher Karl Popper's famous objection to Freudian analysis, on the ground that it was “unfalsifiable.” (If you said that you'd never wanted to have sex with your mother, this was instantly interpretable, via the theory of repression, as an admission that you wanted to have sex with your mother. If, on the other hand, you said that you wanted to have sex with your mother, voilà: you wanted to have sex with your mother.) Gopnik writes that, in the sixties and seventies, “‘Andy Warhol’ may have promoted some banal popular culture. Andy Warhol, the brilliant artist inside those quotes, could be counted on to turn it into art.” Really? How can you tell the difference between the two? “Anything bad is right,” Warhol declared, and Gopnik calls this “as close as he ever came to a guiding aesthetic principle.” But is it a good principle—not just for Warhol, but for us? Better, surely, just to acknowledge that the bad stuff was bad than to try to turn its badness into a postmodern triumph.

If special pleading for the late period is the book's one real weakness, its great strength is its tone. In his time, Warhol was very controversial. Some people thought he was a genius; others, that he should be ar-

rested. Gopnik, though he does believe that his subject is a genius, treats him fairly, calmly, and fondly. If Warhol tells a good joke, Gopnik relays it. In the hospital, soon after he was shot, Warhol said to a friend, “You know, we gotta get some bigger things to hide behind.” When the artist stuffs a photograph of Brando down the front of his pants, we hear about it. As for Warhol's love life, Gopnik manages to convince us, without sentimentality, that, however many cute guys Warhol went through, he always just wanted to fall in love with somebody and settle down. He did fall in love, often—usually with someone who loved him less—but it never worked out for long. The last boyfriend, Jon Gould, a young vice-president at Paramount, declined to sleep in Warhol's room with him, saying that the artist's dachshunds farted on him in bed. Gould died of AIDS within a few years.

Then, there is Warhol's mother, with whom he lived for most of his life. By the time he was courting Jon Gould, Julia, now in her late seventies, was downstairs, going bats, hiding food in secret places around the house. In 1971, she moved back to Pittsburgh, living first with one of Warhol's brothers and then in a nursing home. A cousin repeatedly wrote to Warhol, telling him that Julia survived only in the hope that Andy would visit her before she died. He didn't visit, nor, eventually, did he attend her funeral, though he paid for it. One day soon afterward, a reporter asked him what was on his mind. He answered, “I think about my bird that died. If it went to bird heaven. But I really can't think about that. It just took a walk.”

Fifteen years after his mother died, Warhol, fifty-eight, followed her. It's a wonder that he lasted that long. All his later life, he suffered from an infected gallbladder. He wore a girdle—there's a collection of them, dyed in pretty colors, in the time capsules—just to keep his guts in. He was in constant pain. Finally, one day in February of 1987, he checked himself into New York Hospital. When the surgeons pulled out his gallbladder, they found it falling apart with gangrene. He died the next morning. ♦



BOOKS

INFAMOUS

A debut novel follows three characters in the wake of a terror attack.

BY JAMES WOOD

William Faulkner claimed that he wrote “As I Lay Dying” in six weeks, and the speed makes sense—it comports with the quick intimacy of the book’s form, in which a chorus of first-person narrators plunge us into their soliloquies. This novel, hovering somewhere between the older epistolary structure and pure dramatic monologue—between correspondence and a playscript—becomes magically liberated from the more burdensome narrative machinery, that wheezing apparatus of persuasion and pastness. Instead, we get the immediacy of voice, characters pressing themselves on us without any appar-

ent authorial filter in a continuous oral present, even when they are relating their own histories. This is the form that Megha Majumdar uses for her first novel, “A Burning” (Knopf); she may have taken six weeks or six years to write it, but her book has a similar urgency of appeal. Its characters are at the very front of the stage, and we can feel their breath.

Majumdar marshals a much smaller cast of speakers than Faulkner did, and her spare plot moves with arrowlike determination. It begins with a crime, continues with a false charge and imprisonment, and ends with a trial. The book has some of the elements of a thriller or

a police procedural, but one shouldn’t mistake its extraordinary directness and openness to life with the formulaic accelerations of genre: Majumdar’s novel is compelling, yet its compulsions have to do with an immersive present rather than with a skidding sequence. Her characters start telling us about their lives, and those lives are suddenly palpable, vital, voiced. I can’t remember when I last read a novel that so quickly dismantled the ordinary skepticism that attends the reading of made-up stories. Early Naipaul comes to mind as a precursor, and perhaps Akhil Sharma’s stupendously vivid novel “Family Life.” Sharma has spoken of how he avoided using “sticky” words—words involving touch and taste and smell—so as to enable a natural velocity; Majumdar finds her own way of achieving the effect.

“A Burning” is about the fateful interactions of three principal characters, who take turns sharing their narratives. At its center is a young Muslim woman named Jivan, who lives in the slums of Kolkata, and who witnesses a terrorist incident that tips her life into turmoil. A halted train at a nearby station is firebombed, and the ensuing inferno kills more than a hundred people. At home, Jivan makes the mistake of posting a politically risky question on Facebook—“If the police didn’t help ordinary people like you and me, if the police watched them die, doesn’t that mean that the government is also a terrorist?”—which attracts official attention. The police come for her in the middle of the night. Everything fits: she was seen at the railway station, carrying some kind of package; clothes soaked in kerosene are found at her home; she has been chatting with a “terrorist recruiter” on Facebook; above all, she is, conveniently, poor and Muslim. She is charged with the crime, and spends the rest of the novel in prison, awaiting a trial that will not occur for a year.

There are two people whose testimony could save Jivan, and much of the novel turns on their capacity and their willingness to offer it. One is an aspiring actress named Lovely, who also lives in the slum. Lovely—the name she took at eighteen—is a so-called hijra, a designation that affords intersex and transgender people a recognized status, but a perilously ambiguous and marginal one. She lives in a group house with other

Megha Majumdar’s “A Burning” captures a society’s complex dynamism.

hijras; the little community survives by offering occasional “blessings” (for a marriage, a birth), and by begging. With characteristic buoyancy, Lovely calls herself a “he-she” and a “half-half,” and her jaunty, theatrical, yearning voice dominates the book. It is introduced with quick, fearless simplicity:

Sunday morning! Time to go to acting class. With my hips swinging like this and like that, I am walking past the guava seller.

“Brother,” I am calling, “what’s the time?”

“Eight thirty,” he is grumbling, because he is not wishing to share with me the fruits of his wristwatch. Leave him. I am abandoning my stylish walk and running like a horse to the local train station. . . . Nothing is simple for a person like me, not even one hour on the train. My chest is a man’s chest, and my breasts are made of rags. So what? Find me another woman in this whole city as truly woman as me.

Jivan has been teaching Lovely to read English; the package that she was carrying on the day of the incident contained some books that she was taking to her student. Throughout the novel, Majumdar uses the continuous present tense (“I am abandoning my stylish walk”) and various eccentricities of phrasing (“the fruits of his wristwatch”) to “sound” Lovely’s Bengali into English. This, along with the character’s hardened esprit of the streets, lofts her off the page:

Even a future movie star is having to make money. One morning my sisters and I are spraying rose water in our armpits, braiding our hair, putting bangles on our arms, and together we are going to bless a newborn. The general public is believing that we hijras are having a special telephone to god. So if we bless, it is like a blessing straight from god. At the door of the happy family, I am rattling the lock *thuck thuck thuck*.

The third protagonist, a physical-education teacher called PT Sir, knew Jivan when she was one of the “charity students” at S. D. Gosh Girls’ School. Impressed by Jivan’s athletic prowess, he took an interest in her, gave her extra food, hoped that she might consider him a mentor. But she left school early, and never acknowledged the relationship. Unlike the two other principals, PT Sir is represented in a close third-person present, a voice no less alive than the self-presentations of Jivan and Lovely, but one which appropriately distances us from this stiffly moralizing man of military bearing. When PT Sir sees a news report about the arrest, his

mild estrangement curdles into righteous condemnation:

When he thinks about it, an old anger flickers to life. He had begun to dream of her as a mentee, but she had not considered him a mentor. She had considered him perhaps no more than a source of occasional free food. She had fooled him. . . . Now he knew, there *was* something wrong with Jivan the whole time. There *was* something wrong in her thinking.

Majumdar finds all the resources she needs within this tightly bound trio, steadily widening the novel’s vision of Kolkatan, and Indian, life. Jivan—-independent and intelligent, living at home but mentally elsewhere—had been on the way up: “From an eater of cabbage, I was becoming an eater of chicken.” She was working as a shop assistant in a clothing store called Pantaloons; she had bought a smartphone on an installment plan. In prison, she is now among the outcasts: “We feel we are living at the bottom of a well. We are frogs.” Her companions include Yashwi, who has robbed houses: “In one of them she left a grandfather tied up so tight he suffocated. But she is a nice girl, always smiling.” And Nirmaladi, who used to work as a cook, “until she accepted twenty thousand rupees for putting rat poison in a family’s lunch.” And Kalkidi, whose husband threw acid on her face, “but, somehow, she is the one in jail.” Jivan is visited by an apparently sympathetic journalist, and the encounter allows Majumdar to fill in a little backstory. We hear something about Jivan’s parents: her father is a former rickshaw driver stricken with back problems; her mother, weather permitting, buys food at an illegal night market and cooks meals to sell on the street at dawn. When she was attacked after visiting the market one night, Jivan decided to drop out of school and get a job. And their house—a single room of brick, tin, and tarp near a garbage dump, “a dump that was so big and occupied by so many crows screaming *kaw kaw* from dawn to night, it was famous,” Jivan recounts. “I would say, ‘I live in the house behind the dump,’ and everybody would know where I meant. You could say I lived in a landmark building.”

Majumdar has a gift for using small details and fleeting incidents to nudge her fiction into larger suggestion. Sometimes it’s a phrase—walls “plump with damp”—or a poignant shorthand, like

the one with which Jivan evokes her mother’s awkward inaccessibility at home: “Then my mother cooked, hidden in the kitchen. An atmosphere of smoke and chili about her deterred conversation.” When Jivan is arrested, her mother tries to visit her at the police station, and Majumdar’s minimal description of her approaching the guards—“the stooped woman who came right up to them, her feet in bathroom slippers”—concisely renders a powerlessness the mother herself doesn’t grasp. Elsewhere, Majumdar gets a brief scene to shimmer. In prison, Jivan insists that she has the “right” to tell her side of the story to the press. “You have the right?” one of the inmates replies, mockingly: “Under a smile she buries all else she meant to say.” When the journalist tells Jivan that his editor will make her story “better,” she laughs in bemusement. Her story would be better, she says, if her father had not broken his back, if her mother had not been attacked, if she had finished school. “Not better like that,” the journalist says. “Then like what?” Jivan asks.

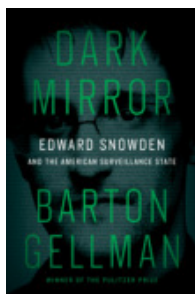
Generally, Majumdar abjures commentary and interior analysis in favor of incident, the decisive ramifications of action. In masterly fashion, she uses very few strokes to help us see how PT Sir begins to transform himself from a modest schoolteacher to a government official. One day, on his way home from the school, he is drawn to a rally held by the Jana Kalyan (“Well being for All”) Party, a stand-in for one of India’s regional parties. A Bollywood star is headlining the event; groups of men are waving saffron-colored flags. PT Sir is handed a Party flag and his forehead is smeared with red paste: he’s in. At the rally, he’s at first merely curious, even disdainful of the thronged, uneducated supporters, lured from the local villages “by a free box of rice and chicken.” But then one of these men gets up on the roof of a car and starts yelling “Praise to the Motherland!” PT Sir watches as the man pulls a dagger from the waistband of his trousers and waves it in the air, where it glints in the sun. Alarmed, admiring, he thinks how free this man seems, how unlike his colleagues at school. Later, on the train home, a *muri walla*, a puffed-rice seller, sees the red mark on PT Sir’s forehead and the Party flag in his hand, and differentially gives him a free portion of

food: “For you, no charge.” PT Sir “feels the other passengers staring at him. They must be thinking, who is this VIP?” His status has just changed; a fuse has been lit. Gradually, PT Sir will bind himself ever more tightly to the inner workings of the anti-Muslim Jana Kalyan Party.

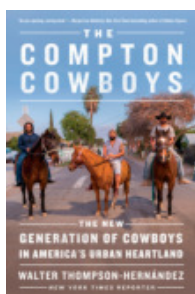
Plot is essentially about desire and obstruction, and the question of whether that obstruction is removed or solidified. Majumdar’s story is, in this sense, classically simple. The two protagonists who may be able to save Jivan find themselves unwilling or unable to do so; at the same time, their own prospects brighten at the cost of Jivan’s freedom, and in relation to their connection to her. PT Sir soon has reason to see that she is roundly condemned, not least because his former association with her is part of what originally made him attractive to the Party leader, Bimala Pal. Lovely, so desperate to break into the movie business, is at last noticed by agents and directors because of her link to the infamous Jivan; yet, the more distance she puts between herself and her former teacher, the more employable she becomes.

It’s only at the end of this brief, brave novel that one becomes fully aware of how broad its judgments have been, how fierce and absolute its condemnations. Through the gaps that open up among and behind these three characters, a large Indian panoply emerges. The book’s surface realism—that great boon to writers—is abundant and busy and life-sown: *muri wallas*, pillow-fillers, guava sellers, a man who grinds tobacco in his palm, not to mention theatrical agents, schoolteachers, hijras, criminals, and criminal politicians. But the system that at once supports and undermines this diverse vitality is seen with an unrelentingly cold authorial eye, in all its small and large corruption, its frozen inequality, murderous racism, political opportunism, and unalleviated poverty. At the same time, because societies are complex, and because Megha Majumdar is a sophisticated student of that complexity, her novel gains flight as a tale of competing dynamism. Her three ambitious and intelligent characters are all moving up, out of the class they were born into; Jivan’s plight is that this ambition, forced by circumstance into a desperate resolve, involves a struggle that she seems fated to lose. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



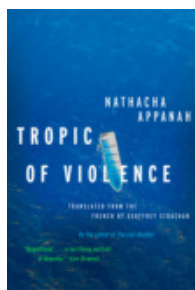
Dark Mirror, by Barton Gellman (Penguin Press). In 2013, the author, reporting for the *Washington Post*, was among those who brought to light the trove of top-secret N.S.A. files leaked by Edward Snowden. Here he delves even deeper into the maze of government secrecy and surveillance, but at the book’s core is his wary, exasperating relationship with his source, who slides between principled candor, exaggeration, and evasion. Gellman takes us through his efforts while reporting to weigh the public’s right to know against the need for secrecy on national-security matters, as he carefully charts the course toward transparency. Even so, when an N.S.A. spokesperson accuses him of being “in love with your source,” he takes seriously the possibility that her words might bear some truth.



The Compton Cowboys, by Walter Thompson-Hernández (William Morrow). The history of African-American ranching in California has its roots in the westward migration following the Civil War. This vivid group portrait of contemporary black cowboys at Richland Farms, in Compton, is a story both of heritage and of urban unrest, gang violence, and confrontations with the police. The Compton Cowboys met, in the eighties and nineties, in a youth horseback-riding program mostly funded by white donors. Taking over the ranch as adults, they sought to reclaim the legacy of black cowboys. Their activities, the author shows, sparked a culture clash in the wider community, but they have also revived interest in the black cowboy life style, indelibly captured in the Cowboys’ motto: “Streets raised us. Horses saved us.”



Man of My Time, by Dalia Sofer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The ruptures of the 1978 Iranian Revolution govern the life of Hamid, the stoic narrator of this novel, which shuttles between the past and the present day. Working for years as a government interrogator, Hamid became estranged from his family, who fled to America. But on a trip to New York, accompanying a government minister on a diplomatic mission, Hamid visits his mother, who asks him to fulfill his father’s wish to have his ashes scattered in Iran. Sofer shows how one generation’s revolt gives rise to another’s. At one point, Hamid, asking the minister for reassurance that history’s disturbances will resolve into peace, is told instead that “the world is inclining toward darkness.”



Tropic of Violence, by Nathacha Appanah, translated from the French by Geoffrey Strachan (Graywolf). This novel by a Mauritian-French writer takes place off the coast of Mozambique, on the island of Mayotte, which is officially part of France, and by far its poorest region. Migrants flock to Mayotte despite its poverty, in the hope of acquiring French passports. In Appanah’s sobering story, a baby boy, Moise, abandoned by his migrant mother, is adopted by a nurse, grows into a rebellious adolescent, and becomes entangled with a sadistic teen-age gang leader. Appanah offers a portrait of a place both beautiful and brutal, suggesting that Mayotte, damaged by colonization, corruption, poverty, and neglect, is fated to afflict its inhabitants in turn.



BOOKS

THE PUBLIC POET

When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ruled supreme.

BY JAMES MARCUS

On March 26, 1882, Ralph Waldo Emerson went to a funeral. As the elderly writer stared into the open casket, he grew perplexed. He could not identify the body. He seemed to know that the man had been a friend—indeed, he felt sad that the bearded stranger in the casket had predeceased him—but Emerson had no idea who he was. “Who is the sleeper?” he finally asked his daughter. The answer was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Emerson was in the throes of dementia. Even so, the story seems like a small allegory of Longfellow’s disappearance from American culture. He

was, in his heyday, the most famous poet in the English-speaking world. Perhaps T. S. Eliot, in his sports-arena-filling prime, would be a comparable figure. But Eliot was lionized by many people who didn’t read his poetry, whereas Longfellow’s books were devoured not only by the literati but by ordinary readers. When Longfellow was received by Queen Victoria, in 1868, she noticed the servants scuffling to get a glimpse of him. To her amazement, they all knew his poetry. No other visitor had provoked “so peculiar an interest,” she noted. “Such poets wear a crown that is imperishable.”

Yet Longfellow’s fame proved to be more perishable than expected. How did he reach the summit, and what explains the century-old collapse of his literary reputation, which now shows some flickering signs of revival? Nicholas Basbanes tells the tale with diligence, affection, and an occasional note of special pleading in “Cross of Snow: A Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow” (Knopf).

The poet was born in 1807 to a distinguished New England family in Portland, a hundred miles or so north of Boston. His father, Stephen Longfellow, served in both the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. His mother, the culture-loving Zilpah Longfellow, discussed literature with young Henry, warning him away from the obscurity he so admired in Thomas Gray’s odes. Poetry, she told him, must instruct and improve. He should avoid poems that “excite the imagination only”—a lesson he may have taken too much to heart.

At the age of fifteen, Longfellow was packed off to Bowdoin College, in nearby Brunswick. His family had considerable clout on campus: his grandfather had helped to found the school, and his father sat on its board of trustees. But this otherwise dutiful son already had some ideas of his own. “I hardly think Nature designed me for the bar, or the pulpit, or the dissecting-room,” he informed his father. In a subsequent letter, he added, “I most eagerly aspire after future eminence in literature.” This got a predictably lukewarm reception from the elder Longfellow, who had himself trained as a lawyer and doubted whether his son could make a living as a writer. “There is not wealth enough in this country to afford encouragement and patronage to merely literary men,” he replied.

In the biographies of literary talents, the father is often viewed as the heavy, crushing the life out of his sensitive child. But Stephen Longfellow happened to be right. At the time, the self-sustaining American writer was a rare thing. So a compromise was fashioned, presumably with familial help. Longfellow, who had just graduated from Bowdoin at eighteen, was offered a chair at the college in modern European languages.

The fruits of nepotism did not end with the gig itself. To prepare his son for the job, Stephen Longfellow stepped

After a century-old collapse, the poet’s reputation shows some signs of revival.

up to finance a lengthy trip to Europe. Henry crossed the Atlantic in 1826 and made his way straight to Paris, where he procured a claret-colored waistcoat and various other dandyish accessories. From there he travelled to Spain, Italy, and Germany. He spent more than three years abroad, assuring his increasingly skeptical parents that he was learning loads. No doubt he treated some of this time as a lark—spring break in the Eternal City. Yet he returned home in 1829 with a remarkable command of French, Italian, and Spanish. This qualified him, in an after-the-fact manner, for his post at Bowdoin—and prepared the ground for his role as the first great internationalist of American letters.

Longfellow was bored at Bowdoin, where he taught for the next six years. He cranked out textbooks on French and Italian grammar and despised his life in the sticks. “I suppose you think I am dead,” he wrote to a friend. “But it is not so; I am only *buried*—in Brunswick.”

Gradually, though, his spirits began to lift. In 1831 he married Mary Potter, the cultivated daughter of a Portland judge, which took the edge off his rural isolation. He reshuffled his European reminiscences into “*Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea*,” a hodgepodge travelogue in the vein of Washington Irving. And then he was offered the escape he was hoping for—the Smith Professorship of Modern Languages at Harvard. There was only one stipulation: he would have to return to Europe to solidify his grasp of German.

Longfellow was jubilant. He departed with Mary in April, 1835, and after stops in England and Denmark they proceeded to the Netherlands. As planned, he immersed himself in one language-learning adventure after another. But in early October, Mary, who was pregnant, had a miscarriage, followed by an infection. She died on November 29th, after issuing a final plea to her husband: “Henry, do not forget me.”

A grieving widower adrift in Europe, Longfellow numbly went about his appointed task, vacuuming up more languages (he came to know fifteen). “There are wounds which are never entirely healed,” he wrote his sister-in-law. He did not wish to let go of his sorrow—

an honest admission from a ruined man, who may have felt that he had little else. But the central drama of his life, and certainly the narrative at the heart of Basbanes’s biography, was about to begin. There would be another marriage, a beloved family, a steady ascent to fame and fortune as a poet. Just not quite yet.

The agent of this transformation was Fanny Appleton, the eighteen-year-old daughter of a Boston textile magnate. Brilliant, beautiful, as book-besotted as her future husband, she was clearly hard to resist. Basbanes seems almost as infatuated with her as his subject was, putting Longfellow on the back burner for twenty pages while he narrates Fanny’s European sojourn of the mid-eighteen-thirties.

What Fanny sought in a suitor, the author tells us, was “intellectual engagement above all else.” She had already batted away numerous candidates, and when she first encountered Longfellow, in Interlaken, Switzerland, in the summer of 1836, he did not strike her as a potential soul mate. “Mr L. very inquisitive,” she wrote in her diary one night, sounding a little fatigued. She seems to have found him a harmless nerd, whose idea of a good time was to read aloud from his own journals or to translate German ballads on the fly (with Fanny supplying some of the best lines).

When Longfellow left, in August, to take up his Harvard appointment, Fanny seemed almost surprised by her sense of loss. But he was captivated by her. After she returned to America with her family, in 1837, he bombarded her with notes, books, articles, and a pair of castanets—this last gift ushering in a long period of silence. The strange fact is that Fanny kept Longfellow waiting for seven years. He suffered bouts of depression, informing one friend that “a leaden melancholy hangs over me:—and from this I pass at times into feverish excitement, bordering on madness.” He took the bold step of publishing a novel, “*Hyperion*,” whose young lovers were plainly patterned on himself and Fanny, and made sure that she got a copy. Yet even this four-hundred-and-thirty-nine-page billet-doux failed to move her. (In a letter to a friend, she dismissed it as “desultory, objectless, a thing of shreds and patches like the Author’s mind.”)

Then something happened. We don’t

know exactly what—and that is striking, given that the two were such ceaseless chroniclers of their own lives. Basbanes, having dived deep into the unpublished journals and correspondence of both parties, comes up empty-handed. What is clear is that in 1843, four years after ridiculing the love offering that was “*Hyperion*,” Fanny crossed Longfellow’s path at a party and they decided to get married. Thus began what the groom called his “*Vita Nuova* of happiness.”

The marriage (including its agonizing preamble) altered the course of Longfellow’s career as a poet. He had published short poems since his teenage years, in newspapers and magazines. His first volume of verse, “*Voices of the Night*,” appeared in 1839, followed by “*Ballads and Other Poems*,” in 1841. Both bundled together Longfellow’s own poems with his translations, suggesting that the two roles were virtually indistinguishable. Both showed his metric ingenuity, his deep acquaintance with European literature, and a weakness for Romantic mush that was frequently offset by his lightness of touch:

So blue yon winding river flows,
It seems an outlet from the sky,
Where waiting till the west wind blows,
The freighted clouds at anchor lie.

But now his domestic happiness emboldened him to try his hand at more ambitious projects. In 1845, he published “*The Poets and Poetry of Europe*,” a hefty anthology of translations (some of them done with Fanny) which was the first of its kind in America. That same year, Longfellow also set to work on “*Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*.” Based on a folkloric nugget he borrowed from his Bowdoin classmate Nathaniel Hawthorne, it was published in 1847 and made Longfellow a national celebrity. He was henceforth not merely a poet but a creator of American mythology—which Americans, in what many still regarded as a history-starved wilderness, bought by the cartload. “*Evangeline*” went through six printings in a matter of months.

His contemporaries mostly adored his books. “I read your poems over and over,” Hawthorne gushed to the author after bingeing on “*Voices of the Night*” in 1839. “Nothing equal to some

of them was ever written in this world.” The excitable John Greenleaf Whittier wrote about “Evangeline” in similar terms: “Eureka!—Here, then, we have it at last! An American poem, with the lack of which British reviewers have so long reproached us.” Even Walt Whitman, an unlikely fan, declared that “his influence is like good drink or air. He is not tepid either, but always vital with flavor, motion, grace.”

What, exactly, were his peers responding to? “Evangeline” is a good place to start. The poem is a verse narrative—a romance, really—built on a factual foundation: Britain’s expulsion of the Acadians from what are now the Canadian Maritime Provinces between 1755 and 1763. This was essentially an act of ethnic cleansing, and Longfellow is alert to the tragedy of the Acadian exile. But the engine of the poem is Evangeline’s search for her lover, Gabriel, dragged away by the British on a ship and dumped somewhere in the American outback. Her odyssey plays to Longfellow’s strengths as a pastoralist, on display in the famous first lines:

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring
pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green,
indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and
prophetic . . .

In a typical move, Longfellow chose to write his North American epic in dactylic hexameters, a meter most commonly identified with ancient Greek and Latin verse. It can sound cumbersome to the contemporary American ear, less like poetry than like highly decorative prose—prose in its Sunday best. Still, there are many stretches where the dancing dactyls propel the narrative forward. For every moment of fustian (Longfellow never met an extended simile he didn’t like), there are surprising bits of lyricism: “Nearer and round about her, the manifold flowers of the garden / Poured out their souls in odors, that were their prayers and confessions.” And, lest we pigeon-hole Longfellow as a nature guy, he is quick to supply a memorable couplet about an epidemic in Philadelphia: “So death flooded life, and, o’erflowing its natural margin, / Spread to a brackish lake, the silver stream of existence.” (To borrow Ezra Pound’s famous defini-

tion of literature, this is certainly news that stays news.)

So the original readers of “Evangeline” responded to its archaic music, its romantic agonies, and its endlessly unscrolling panorama of the New World. This last point helps to explain Whittier’s delight at having stumbled across an “American poem.” But how American was it? Like many post-colonials, Longfellow’s compatriots were battling over the question of national identity, with a good many factions in the mud pit. Some, like Emerson, argued that the ballast of European culture would need to be cast off—that the new nation should be made up from scratch. But Longfellow, with his vast mental reservoir of languages and literatures, felt otherwise. He was, as we now say, a globalist. Instead of Emerson’s slash-and-burn approach to America’s cultural patrimony, he preferred Goethe’s notion of *Weltliteratur*—the idea that all poems and cultures were in constant, chattering, shape-shifting dialogue.

Longfellow took this cross-pollinating tendency to new heights in “The Song of Hiawatha.” “I have at length hit upon a plan for a poem on the American Indians,” he confided to his journal in 1854. He would “weave together their beautiful traditions into a whole.” As usual, he preferred an imported meter—in this case, the rapid-fire trochees and poetic architecture of the Finnish epic “Kalevala.” But Longfellow was



determined to immerse himself in the particulars of Native American legend. He pored over Henry Schoolcraft’s ethnographic studies as well as an autobiography given to him by George Copway, an Ojibwa lecturer and erstwhile Methodist minister. The result was a world-spanning fantasia, unfolding in lines “so plain and childlike, / Scarcely can the ear distinguish / Whether they are sung or spoken.”

Longfellow’s protagonist is an Ojibwa

superman: he brings peace to his people, and teaches them to grow corn and jot down their thoughts in a pictographic alphabet. In this sense, he is cast as a modernizer, turning noble savages into solid citizens. Yet Longfellow never strays from what he took to be the animism of the Ojibwa: what greater gift is there to a poet than a world in which every bird, tree, and insect has a soul? This means that the tiniest incident—say, the descent of crows upon a cornfield—takes on a Homeric heft:

Soon they came with caw and clamor,
Rush of wings and cry of voices,
To their work of devastation,
Settling down upon the corn-fields,
Delving deep with beak and talon,
For the body of Mondamin.

When it was published, in 1855, “The Song of Hiawatha” quickly outstripped “Evangeline” in its success, selling four thousand copies on its first day alone. There was a wealth of parodies, “made tempting,” as Basbanes notes, “by the tom-tom tempo of the meter.” But these, too, were a tribute to the poem’s pervasive presence in American popular culture, which eventually spawned not only related works of art but Hiawatha-branded tobacco, bicycles, dishes, Christmas stockings, soap, potato sacks, thermometers, and biscuit tins. Truly, Longfellow was everywhere. By the end of his life, as the scholar Bliss Perry pointed out, carping about this beloved icon was no more acceptable than “carrying a rifle into a national park.”

Then the worm turned. Not surprisingly, it was the modernists who ejected Longfellow from the pantheon, viewing his metrical sleekness and front-parlor gentility as the worst kind of Victorian dross. The critic Van Wyck Brooks delivered the death blow in 1915. “Longfellow is to poetry,” he declared, “what the barrel-organ is to music.” Reputations rise and fall and rise again, and many writers retreat into a kind of hibernation when they die, waiting for the warmth of renewed acclaim to bring them back to life. Yet Basbanes seems to take Longfellow’s banishment rather personally. In fact, he alleges a hit job. Longfellow, he insists, “was the victim of an orchestrated dismissal that may well be unique in American literary history—widely revered in one century,

methodically excommunicated from the ranks of the worthy in the next.”

Come now. Many revered writers have dropped down the memory hole, including Longfellow’s peers William Cullen Bryant and James Russell Lowell. For that matter, the passing decades have yielded additional reasons for Longfellow’s critical antagonists to beat him over the head. There is, for example, the matter of cultural appropriation and the big fat target that is “Hiawatha.” The poet would probably play the *Weltliteratur* card and move on. And, indeed, his multiculturalism now looks admirably prescient. So does his social conscience, which led him to publish “Poems on Slavery,” in 1842—a daring move at the time, and the object of a vicious review by Edgar Allan Poe. (The collection, Poe sneered, was “intended for the especial use of those negrophilic old ladies of the north, who form so large a part of Mr. LONGFELLOW’s friends.”) The poet also backed up his words with deeds, using some of his profits from “Hiawatha” to secretly buy slaves out of bondage. If any writer of his era is able to survive the obstacle course of cancel culture, it is likely to be Longfellow.

The ultimate litmus test, however, is the poetry. I snapped up the Library of America edition of “Poems and Other Writings” with a thrill of anticipation, fully hoping to encounter the Promethean figure of Basbanes’s biography. Reader, I tried. I thumbed through several hundred tissue-thin pages, added my wobbly midrash in mechanical pencil, chanted long passages aloud. I encountered the gems I have mentioned above, and many more. I was also won over by the sheer decency of the man, which seems somehow inextricable from his creations. As Oscar Wilde noted, perhaps with double-edged irony, “Longfellow was himself a beautiful poem, more beautiful than anything he ever wrote.”

Still, the vagaries of taste have performed their dismal magic. So much of his work seems dull, shopworn, generic. The Victorian music is there, sometimes gloriously, but just as often on the best toy piano you ever heard. It was Robert Lowell who characterized Longfellow as “Tennyson without gin.” That’s about right—he is, except in his very

best work, only mildly intoxicating, the equivalent of near beer. He also had the bad luck of operating in the shadow of Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the two mighty poles of American poetry, maximal and minimal, ego-drunk and ecstatic. Forgivably, he looks more than a little wan in their company.

And yet. “Hiawatha” will always give pleasure, its singsong acceleration like riding a bicycle downhill on a crisp autumn afternoon. The earworms, of which there are many, will keep echoing in our head, long after we’ve forgotten their original provenance. The poems of mourning, which made Longfellow into the nation’s grief counsellor, may even elicit what they did more than a century ago: tears.

This last point is worth dwelling on. After the turbulence of his early decades, the second half of Longfellow’s life can easily seem a sunlit vista of ease and accomplishment. The most celebrated poet of his day, he was also among the best paid—in 1874, the *New York Ledger* forked over four thousand dollars (the equivalent today of more than eighty thousand dollars) for a single poem, “The Hanging of the Crane.” He continued to function as the great conduit between world literature and the American public, translating “The Divine Comedy” and overseeing a thirty-one-volume behemoth, “Poems of Places,” conceived as “a kind of poetic guidebook” for its indefatigable readers. Not even fame managed to corrode his good nature. Year in and year out, Longfellow personally greeted the fans that flocked to his Cambridge dwelling, offering each one an autographed card from a stack he kept at hand.

Yet this phase of his life was also marked by catastrophic loss. In 1848, his baby daughter died after a short illness. (The Longfellows had three more daughters, and the poet commemorated them in “The Children’s Hour,” thereby introducing “the patter of little feet” into the sentimental lexicon.) More horrifically, his beloved Fanny perished in 1861, when her dress caught fire, most likely from a few drops of hot sealing wax falling onto the garment. Longfellow tried to quench the flames with a small rug, and then with his arms, but it was no use—she died the next morn-

ing. His hands and face were burned as well, and swollen for weeks. The psychic wounds were deeper still. Writing to his dear friend George William Curtis, he described himself as “utterly wretched and overwhelmed,—to the eyes of others, outwardly, calm; but inwardly bleeding to death.”

It was not in Longfellow’s nature to write about himself. He once described “I” as “that objectionable pronoun.” But he did produce a handful of lyrics throughout his career that seemed to spring directly from his own suffering. Several of these went on to become national touchstones. “Resignation,” about his daughter’s death, was published in 1849—and over the next few decades its key lines turned up on children’s tombstones throughout the United States. Then there is “The Cross of Snow,” an elegiac sonnet that Basbanes thought so crucial to understanding Longfellow that he chose it as his title.

Longfellow finished the poem on the eighteenth anniversary of Fanny’s death, slipped it into an envelope, and deposited it in the vast drift of his papers. In this sense, it is a private utterance. It is not, of course, a raw confessional, and the first half consists of a fairly straightforward treatment of Fanny’s portrait on the wall. But then, without any reader-friendly transition, Longfellow cuts to something more mysterious:

There is a mountain in the distant West
That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
Displays a cross of snow upon its side.

Basbanes suggests that the image is derived from a very specific source, the painter Thomas Moran’s “The Mountain of the Holy Cross” (1875), which depicts an alpine oddity: cruciform trenches on the flank of a Colorado peak, whose depth and placement keep the snow within them from melting. Longfellow was doubtless drawn to the cross as an emblem of Christian suffering. But what sticks in the mind, and stirs the heart, are those “sun-defying” depths, where we are too numb to feel our pain, or to control it. As a poet, Longfellow would visit these depths only infrequently. It’s a pity. They brought out something extraordinary in him: muted songs of lamentation, more moving for having been delivered sotto voce, the sadness bleeding through the satin finish. ♦



THE ART WORLD

APART

Edward Hopper's solitude.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

I've been thinking a lot about Edward Hopper. So have other stay-at-homes, I notice online. The visual bard of American solitude—not loneliness, a maudlin projection—speaks to our isolated states these days with fortuitous poignance. But he is always doing that, pandemic or no pandemic. Aloneness is his great theme, symbolizing America: insecure selfhoods in a country that is only abstractly a nation. “E pluribus unum,” a magnificent ideal, thuds on “unum” every day throughout the land. Only law—we’re a polity of lawyers—confers unity on the United States, which might sensibly be a Balkans of regional sovereignties had the Civil War not been so awful as to remove that option, come what may. Hopper’s region is the Northeast, from New York to parts of New England, but his

perceptions apply from coast to coast. Born in Nyack in 1882, and dying in 1967 after living for half a century in an apartment on Washington Square, he couldn’t conceivably have developed as he did in any other culture. His subjects—atomized persons, inauspicious places—are specific to his time. But his mature art, which took two decades to gestate before consolidating in the nineteen-twenties, is timeless, or perhaps time-free: a series of freeze-dried, uncannily telling moments.

Though termed a realist, Hopper is more properly a Symbolist, investing objective appearance with clenched, melancholy subjectivity. He was an able draftsman and masterly as a painter of light and shadow, but he ruthlessly subordinated aesthetic pleasure to the compacted description—as dense as

uranium—of things that answered to his feelings without exposing them. Nearly every house that he painted strikes me as a self-portrait, with brooding windows and almost never a visible or, should one be indicated, inviting door. If his pictures sometimes seem awkwardly forced, that’s not a flaw; it’s a guarantee that he has pushed the communicative capacities of painting to their limits, then a little bit beyond. He leaves us alone with our own solitude, taking our breath away and not giving it back. Regarding his human subjects as “lonely” evades their truth. We might freak out if we had to be those people, but—look!—they’re doing O.K., however grim their lot. Think of Samuel Beckett’s famous tag “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” Now delete the first sentence. With Hopper, the going-on is not a choice.

I haven’t seen “Edward Hopper: A Fresh Look at Landscape,” a large show at the lately reopened Beyeler Foundation, Switzerland’s premier museum of modern art, outside Basel. I take its fine catalogue, edited by the exhibition’s curator, Ulf Küster, as occasion enough for reflecting anew on the artist’s stubborn force. I rely as well on memories that we likely share of encountering “Nighthawks” (1942) and “Early Sunday Morning” (1930), but also, really, anything from his hand. Once you’ve seen a Hopper, it stays seen, lodged in your mind’s eye. The reason, beyond exacting observation and authentic feeling, is an exceptional stylistic cleverness. Hopper was explicit on this score, saying, in 1933, “I have tried to present my sensations in what is the most congenial and impressive form possible to me.” Exasperated by questions of what his works meant, he squelched one interviewer by exclaiming, “I’m after ME.” The remark reflects his debts to European Romanticism and Symbolism, which he absorbed in depth while stripping away any stylistic resemblances. Highly literate, he read and reread nineteenth-century German and French poetry all his life. His poetic liberties in a realist mode point back to one of his favorite predecessors, Gustave Courbet. And a certain smoldering vehemence in Hopper puts me in mind of Théodore Géricault, except tamped down to static views of drab actualities.

“Cape Cod Morning,” from 1950. Once you’ve seen a Hopper, it stays seen.

Hopper imported, or smuggled, some emotive powers of European traditions to unforgiving American soil.

Having studied in New York with Robert Henri and other preceptors of the Ashcan School, who addressed modernity with vernacular realism, he had three sojourns in Paris. There he emulated minor Post-Impressionists with restless variations of tonal contrasts and off-kilter compositions. Back home, while supporting himself as a commercial illustrator, he found a way forward by way of etching. Heavily inked cows, railroad tracks, and a banal house in “American Landscape” (1920) presaged a direction unlike that of any of his contemporaries. The closest was his mystically inclined acquaintance Charles Burchfield, whose rapturous treatments of unprepossessing sites in western New York State have aged very well, informing a trend today among young painters toward potent representation. Less imitable, Hopper has never ceased to influence the thinking, at the very least, of subsequent artists. Willem de Kooning, as Küster recounts in the catalogue, praised him to an interviewer in 1959. De Kooning noted a startling effect of the summarily brushed woods in the background of “Cape Cod Morning” (1950), in which a woman is seen from the side leaning forward at a bay window and staring at something beyond the picture’s right edge: “The forest looks real, like a forest, like you turn on it and there it is, like you turn and actually see it.” That’s on the mark with Hopper: there-ness that becomes hereness, in a viewer’s eye and mind.

A catalogue essay by David M. Lubin, the esteemed scholar of art history in relation to popular culture, makes a connection that I’ve often thought about myself: Hopper and Alfred Hitchcock. The Yank painter and the Brit cinéaste display remarkable parallels as visual storytellers. Hitchcock, learning American experience from scratch after immigrating to Hollywood in 1939, at the age of thirty-nine, acknowledged the influence. The Bates house in “Psycho” reproduces, with simplifications, the already suitably ominous Victorian in Hopper’s “House by the Railroad” (1925). Lubin concentrates

on suspenseful narrative tactics, which I would enlarge to cover methods of composition and aspects of temperament. Hitchcock storyboarded scenes and shots for his films. Hopper (incidentally, an addicted moviegoer) as much as did the same for his paintings. I once got to inspect a stack of studies that he’d made on paper. Some sheets bore only drawn rectangles: seeking the right proportions for what he had in mind. Then there were congeries of details with which he auditioned, in effect, particular body parts, architectural features, or other elements that would be knitted into dramatic wholes. Both he and Hitchcock aimed for the soundness and the suddenness of sights that compress time in service to a preimagined vision. Each knew the feeling—because he felt it—that the effort would trigger in viewers.

Hitchcock shares with Hopper a predilection for jarring relations of backgrounds to foregrounds in pictorial space: perhaps someone or something relatively innocuous is nearby and something less calming is yonder. Lubin offers the example, from “North by Northwest,” of the distant crop-dusting plane at work “where there ain’t no crops.” In certain pictures of rural dwellings by Hopper, woods (like those in “Cape Cod Morning”) or topographical formations subtly menace a human intrusion. But in Hitchcock’s work, and in Hopper’s, especially, the unnerving relation of the far to the near is often reversed, and what’s mysterious, if not sinister, becomes identical with our point of view. What are we doing here, seeing that? Voyeurism—the saddest excitement—may be suggested. The emotional tug of many of Hitchcock’s characters and all of Hopper’s requires their unawareness of being looked at. To see them is to take on a peculiar responsibility. Hopper often produces the unease even in unpeopled landscapes and views of buildings, as if catching nature and habitation defenselessly exposed in disarray, mundanity, or squalor. The New England coastlines, lighthouses, and sailboats that he painted on summer excursions get off relatively easy. He liked them. But they, too, feel taken by surprise, depicted from odd angles of vision. No judgment is passed on anyone or anything,

one way or another. The naked fact of their existence is provocative enough. “Why is there something rather than nothing?” cosmologists wonder. Hopper is all ears for the answer.

Politically, Hopper was “a sort of McKinley conservative,” his friend the novelist John Dos Passos remarked. The artist scorned the New Deal art programs of the thirties as sops to mediocrity. Interrupting a vacation on Cape Cod in 1940, he returned to New York to register to vote in order to cast his ballot against Franklin Roosevelt. The orientation leaves no mark in his work that I can detect—Hopper’s artistic passion disallowed the trivia of opinionating—but it chimes with a wary individualism that could seem to refuse agreement about practically everything with almost everybody except his painter wife, Josephine Nivison. Having first met as art students around 1905, they married in 1924 and were symbiotically a unit. (Their closeness strikingly recalls that of Hitchcock’s taut, creatively collaborative marriage with the screenwriter Alma Reville.) Nivison supervised a detailed ledger of all Hopper’s works and served, at her insistence and with his consent, as his only model when he painted nudes. She was as vivacious as he was taciturn. (She once joked that talking with him was like dropping a rock down a well and waiting to hear it hit, in vain.) Hopper’s last painting, “Two Comedians” (1965), pictures the pair of them in commedia-dell’arte costume as Pierrot and Pierrette on a stage, taking a bow.

Nivison aside, or standing guard, Hopper’s independence feels absolute, repelling attempts to associate him with any other artist or social group. In this, he updates and passes along to the future the spirit of a paradigmatically American text, “Self-Reliance,” minus Ralph Waldo Emerson’s optimism. The free, questing citizen has devolved into one or another of millions rattling around on a comfortless continent. Can you pledge patriotic allegiance to a void? Hopper shows how, exploring a condition in which, by being separate, we belong together. You don’t have to like the idea, but, once you’ve truly experienced this painter’s art, it is as impossible to ignore as a stone in your shoe. ♦



ON TELEVISION

NETWORK POLITICS

The offerings of HBO Max.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

Snappy as it sounded, the term “streaming wars,” in retrospect, was an overblown way to describe the competition between the companies that hoped to monopolize TV streaming. Little about the rollouts of the major subscription services this year has seemed grand or strategic. A better martial allusion? Clusterfuck. Teasers promise portals to unprecedented ways of viewing programs new and old, but so much curation soon starts to look like clutter. Subscribe to Apple TV+, Disney+ and Hulu, Netflix, the ill-fated Quibi, and now HBO Max—the latest of the big-deal bundles to premiere, in late May—and find

yourself participating in a bitter joke: we have invented cable.

HBO, the tentpole of WarnerMedia, is still a symbol of prestige television, and a lingering fidelity to the network will, I suspect, draw many people to HBO Max, even though the network has done a poor job of explaining what the new service actually is, or how it differs from the video-on-demand fixture that predates it, HBO Now. Subscribers, paying up to fifteen dollars a month, will get access to all HBO series, more than two thousand feature films, other WarnerMedia television properties, and attractive extras like the

works of the Japanese animation director Hayao Miyazaki’s Studio Ghibli. The library is nowhere near as deep as Netflix’s, but that lends HBO Max a veneer of the bespoke. Still, as economic depression looms, what seemed like a necessity a few months ago may now be, for many people, an unjustifiable luxury.

HBO Max meant to celebrate its inauguration with a newly shot “Friends” special. The series, which WarnerMedia grabbed from Netflix, along with “The Big Bang Theory,” is its biggest syndication coup. But the novel coronavirus doesn’t like reunions. Several original series were also put on pause mid-development, which is fine, since the real draw is WarnerMedia’s archive.

The new shows that came into being just before the shutdown are plastic simulacra of shows of yore—the kind of pretty, algorithmic television that pleasantly empties a quarantined mind. “The Sopranos” is in no danger of being surpassed by any of them. “Love Life,” from the newcomer Sam Boyd, starring the fizzy Anna Kendrick as a twentysomething struggling to find romance in New York City, is like “Girls” on low-battery mode. “Legendary,” a competition between houses in the ballroom community, has an irksome superficiality; you can always tell when producers forget that reality TV is a craft. It dazzles because of its contestants but is cavalier in its shiny corporatizing of a queer art. The best of the new shows is “The Not-Too-Late Show with Elmo,” on which Cookie Monster serves as co-host and guests include such child-friendly celebrities as John Mulaney, who made a quirky and moving children’s special last year for Netflix, and a giggling Jimmy Fallon. Elmo is a conscientious interviewer and an icon for our homebound time; like all of us, he is perpetually pantsless and very hairy. I asked Xavier, my five-year-old nephew, what he thought of “Not-Too-Late,” and he said it was “the best thing in the world!”

An anomaly on this cutesy slate is “On the Record,” a wrenching film about sexual assault in hip-hop. It was directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, who, in the documentaries “The Invisible War” and “The Hunting Ground,” about sexual assault in the

“On the Record” is a lesson in power and its caprices.

U.S. military and on college campuses, respectively, have forged an empathetic style of muckraking. More than a dozen women have accused Russell Simmons, the mogul co-founder of Def Jam Recordings, of sexual misconduct, from the eighties to 2014. Journalists such as Melena Ryzik and Joe Coscarelli, at the *Times*, have found the accusers credible, but Simmons, despite being forced to leave his companies in 2017, has suffered relatively few legal ramifications. Years ago, he reinvented himself as a mild-mannered yogi; recently, he moved to Bali. He and other pioneers of the scene have been accorded a complicated veneration in the black-music space. In some ways, this esteem is more intractable than that given to any individual artist. Canceled R. Kelly, and R.&B. endures. But how to excommunicate a forefather who successfully pitched hip-hop to the world as valuable, in every sense of the word? Cancel Russell Simmons, and the house falls.

How “On the Record” came to HBO Max is a lesson in power and its caprices. In January, shortly before the film was to premiere at Sundance, Oprah Winfrey, who had signed on as an executive producer, pulled out. Apple TV+, working with Oprah, dropped out, too. Speaking to Gayle King on CBS, Winfrey framed her decision in terms of journalistic caution: “I just care about getting it right, and I think there are some inconsistencies in the stories.” She has also said that Simmons pressured her to drop the project but that his efforts did not influence her decision. Regardless, the commotion overshadowed the film before it was widely seen.

“On the Record,” which HBO Max picked up in February, follows Drew Dixon, the daughter of Sharon Pratt, the first black female mayor of Washington, D.C. Dixon grew up a music obsessive in D.C. and, after graduating from Stanford, came to New York in 1992, to make a name for herself in the industry; early in the film, we watch as she walks down the Bedford-Stuyvesant blocks where, a generation ago, she befriended the Notorious B.I.G. When Dixon, a phenomenal speaker and a true believer, was working in A.&R. at Def Jam in 1994, she recalls, one of Simmons’s handlers warned her to make herself invisible, because he

didn’t have time for any of Simmons’s “tall, skinny bitches.” (In the film, Dixon, transported by the memory, imitates the handler’s accent, her eyes flickering.) Dixon details her sustained sexual harassment by Simmons, who, she alleges, exposed himself to her at work and lured her to his apartment in 1995 and raped her. (Simmons said in a statement to the filmmakers, “I have issued countless denials of the false allegations against me. . . . I have lived my life honorably as an open book for decades, devoid of any kind of violence against anyone.”)

The title is a double entendre; the directors watch as Dixon, in 2017, goes to the *Times* with her story, and then takes calls from Coscarelli, who tells her that other women have accused Simmons of misconduct as well. The intimate portrait soon seamlessly expands to include testimonies from the activist and former model Sil Lai Abrams, the rapper Sherri Hines, and the screenwriter Jenny Lumet, who described her alleged assault by Simmons in an open letter published in the *Hollywood Reporter*.

“On the Record” is an alternative history, a version of VH1’s “Behind the Music” narrated not by the male victors but from a black feminist perspective that sees hip-hop as the enterprise of ingenious yet wounded men. The underdog status accorded to the genre, the film suggests, permitted unchecked decadence and unchecked power. “I didn’t want to let the culture down,” Dixon says. “I love the culture.” After leaving Def Jam, Dixon worked for the record executive L. A. Reid, who she alleges harassed her, and then left the music industry. (Reid denies having harassed Dixon.)

No emergent hip-hop fanatics can claim their education complete without hearing the sociological analyses delivered in the film by the music journalist and theorist Joan Morgan, the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Kierna Mayo, the longtime steward of *Ebony*. The film’s buzziest line of inquiry is its audit of #MeToo, which did not make space for the experiences of black women. The mixture of rage and resignation I felt after watching was compounded by the suspicion that “On the Record” may get lost in the shuffle. ♦



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MID-CENTURY MURK

"Shirley" and "The Vast of Night."

BY ANTHONY LANE

*Elisabeth Moss stars as the writer Shirley Jackson in Josephine Decker's film.*

The title of Josephine Decker's new film, "Shirley," refers neither to the novel of that name by Charlotte Brontë nor, in a slightly different vein, to Shirley Temple, whose dimple-powered career now seems beyond belief, but to the author Shirley Jackson. She is indelibly linked to *The New Yorker*, where her most affronting tale, "The Lottery," was first published, in 1948, causing thousands of readers to drop the butter knife. She wrote reams of other stories, plus half a dozen novels, such as "Hangsamen" (1951) and "The Haunting of Hill House" (1959). Her dark star has continued to ascend, summoning an invaluable biography by Ruth Franklin, "A Rather Haunted Life," and a more presumptuous offering, "Shirley," by Susan Scarf Merrell, who uses scraps of Jackson's experience, not least her abrasive marriage to the literary critic Stanley Hyman, to beget a work of fiction. And *that* is the book that Decker has chosen to bring to the screen. Ours not to reason why.

Jackson is played by Elisabeth Moss, who, having reigned over "The Handmaid's Tale," on TV, is now the first

choice of casting directors when toil and trouble loom. To "Shirley" she lends both heft and bite, as well as a pair of thick spectacles and a thrumming—and draining—unhappiness that rarely lets up. Most of the movie is set in Bennington, Vermont, where Shirley is starting to labor on "Hangsamen" and where Stanley (Michael Stuhlbarg) is teaching at the all-female college. There, if rumor be true, he sports with his charges. He has a dense beard, a wicked smile, and, when we first see him, a festive garland of ivy wreathing his brow. Were the camera to pan down, we would, no doubt, observe his cloven hooves.

The plot, devised by Merrell in her novel, turns on the introduction into the Hyman household of another couple: Fred Nemser (Logan Lerman), a youthful professor, and Rose (Odessa Young), his new bride, who is great with child. "Well, I hope it's yours," Shirley remarks to Fred, at the dinner table, unsheathing her claws without ado. Rose is initially, and understandably, dismayed by such an approach; as the months crawl by, however, the two women draw close. "I'm a witch, didn't anyone tell

you?" Shirley says, and Rose soon warms to the role of sorcerer's apprentice, learning to berate the moral fecklessness of their menfolk, and to chip away at social norms. At a party, hosted by the wife of the dean, Shirley pours red wine on a silken couch and watches—or imagines—her protégée quietly dropping sandwiches on the rug.

Just one question: Where are the kids? In reality, the Hymans had four children, three by the time that "Hangsamen" was published. If they are airbrushed out of "Shirley" (even as the fictional Nemser is conjured into existence), it must be because they would sorely inconvenience the mood for which Decker strives. Jackson, according to her biographer, "loved rooms that were filled with books and cats and color and sunlight," but only the books make it into the film, plus one cat—black, of course, to suit the witching hour. Lines are delivered either snappishly or with listless pauses. "They talk. About me. In town," Shirley says. At one point, Rose finds her sprawled on the floor, with her eyes wide open and her stockings rolled down. Thunder crashes outside. The camera lurches sideways, like a drunk. Help!

No one can question Decker's creative right to take such liberties with the truth. Movies live and thrive on irresponsibility. How strange it feels, though, when so little seems to be liberated in the process. Jackson's book of essays on her domestic exploits, "Life Among the Savages" (1953), rich in the comedy of parental mishaps, is a fascinating complement, not an embarrassment, to her graver tales of the stifling and the macabre. "Shirley," by contrast, coats her in gothic excess as if glazing a ham, and of her humor scarcely a shred remains. As a sworn devotee of "Airplane!," I found myself praying that once—just once—she would utter the words "And don't call me Shirley," thus rending the veil of gloom from top to bottom. Sadly, it was not to be.

There is no such town as Cayuga, New Mexico, but, thanks to "The Vast of Night," we feel we know it well. We know that its population is less than five hundred; that its radio station is WOTW, staffed by a young fellow named Everett Sloan (Jake Horowitz); and that Fay Crocker (Sierra McCor-

mick), who has a part-time job on the switchboard at the telephone exchange, is sixteen years old, with a cousin named Ethel and a brand-new tape recorder. Everybody in Cayuga seems to know everyone else, and, on the night when the movie takes place, most of the everyone are at the high school, supporting their basketball team, the Statesmen, at a big game. So the town feels kind of deserted, as if it were waiting for something.

Fay is a science nut in bat-wing spectacles. (Everett, naturally, prefers the Buddy Holly look. In the eyewear stakes, Shirley Jackson has some serious competition.) The era, I'd guess, is the late nineteen-fifties, after Sputnik, and talk of space is in the air. Fay reads magazines like *Modern Mechanics*, and thrills to the futures that they promise. By the year 2000, she tells Everett, you'll have "a miniature television screen, and you can keep it in your pocket, so you can call your friend in Rome, or New York." The only downside being that "if you call your friend, and he doesn't answer, then you know they're dead." All of which means that Fay is ready and primed when a call comes through on the switchboard. Not a regular voice—more of a chewy, stuttering sound. Unfriendly, too. Somebody mentioned a squirrel that bit through the wires up at the school, so maybe it's the same critter. Maybe it's not.

The movie is directed by Andrew Patterson, though I'm damned if I can spot him in the credits, either at the beginning or at the end. Still, they do list Nehemiah Knox as "Assisant Editor," without the "t," and have the courtesy to thank Donut Hut and Carla's

Wacky Shack Salon in Whitney, Texas, where the bulk of the action was filmed. The whole enterprise probably cost less than one per cent of the budget of, say, "Star Trek Beyond" (2016), and Patterson has revealed that, for some of the travelling shots, the camera was mounted on a go-kart, run by a Whitney kid of eighteen. But here's the thing: all memory of "Star Trek Beyond" has been surgically extracted from my hippocampus, whereas "The Vast of Night" is the most absorbing piece of small-scale science fiction—the best since "Monsters" (2010), for sure—into which it's been my privilege to be sucked. As Everett says, "If there's something in the sky, I wanna know." Same here.

There are flickers of in-jokes. The hero's name is a nod to the actor Everett Sloane, familiar from "The Big Knife" (1955) and "Somebody Up There Likes Me" (1956). And "The Vast of Night" is framed as an episode of a TV series, "Paradox Theater"—"caught between logic and myth," we learn, and clearly modelled on "The Twilight Zone," which first screened in 1959. Yet Patterson is no spoofer, and his film is a careful compound of gravity and buzz. Trifling chatter among the good folk of Cayuga is interspersed with long, patient takes, in which a single character tells of past events. We hear from Billy (Bruce Davis), who calls into WOTW and recounts the time when, on military detail, he helped to build a large structure for housing a mysterious craft. Then, we have Mabel (Gail Cronauer), an elderly lady at 1616 Sycamore, whose little son ventured out into the darkness long ago and was, she claims, "taken up from this Earth."

We think of other boys: the one who is spirited off in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (1977), or the one at the start of "Invaders from Mars" (1953), who spies a flying saucer from his bedroom window. "The Vast of Night" relies on Fay, an older but no less eager witness. In McCormick's fine performance, she is by turns the most intent of listeners, when required, and also the busiest of bees. ("I never ride in cars, I just walk everywhere!") There's an amazing scene in which the camera, as if challenging Fay to a race, pulls away from her and out through the door of the telephone exchange, before snaking fast and low along the main street of Cayuga, then off through yards and orchards, and winding up amid the cheerleaders on the basketball court. A guided tour, you might say, to an entire way of life. Full marks to the go-kart.

Is that life under genuine threat? Are the Soviets coming, as Everett says? How about forces from farther away? Toward the end, we find out, with the aid of special effects, though part of me wishes we didn't. The movie might have been cheaper still, I reckon; Patterson could have skipped the effects, saved the cash, and got himself a trim at the Wacky Shack. So skillfully has he probed the power of suggestion, dealing in glimmers and snatches, that the idea of a *solution* feels redundant. What matters about Everett, Fay, and their fellow-Americans, after all, is their craving to believe—to fear, under the vast of night, that somebody up there doesn't like them. That's enough. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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VOLUME XCVI, NO. 16, June 8 & 15, 2020. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four combined issues: February 17 & 24, June 8 & 15, July 6 & 13, and August 3 & 10) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Piper Goodspeed, head of brand revenue strategy; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Wolfgang Blau, chief operating officer and president, international; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, U.S. artistic director and global content advisor; Mike Goss, chief financial officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lars Kenseth, must be received by Sunday, June 14th. The finalists in the May 25th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 29th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“All his pitches have been inside.”
Ben Fishel, Washington, D.C.

“I have to hang up. I'm on deck.”
Susan F. Breitman, West Hartford, Conn.

“Seriously, you wouldn't believe my seats.”
Brent Colburn, Princeton, N.J.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Try the stairs. This takes an eternity.”
Michael Crowley, Washington, D.C.



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